

# HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The Jesuit Educational  
Center for Human Development

**Helping Scrupulous Persons**

**Development During Mature Years**

**Embodied Love in Celibate Ministry**

**Doubts Trigger Spiritual Growth**

**Reflections on Retirement**

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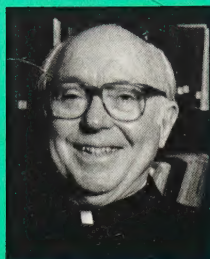
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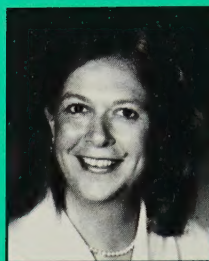
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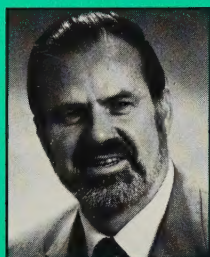




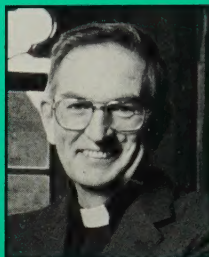
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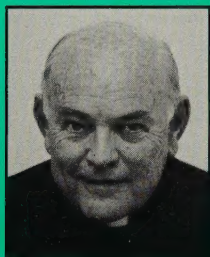
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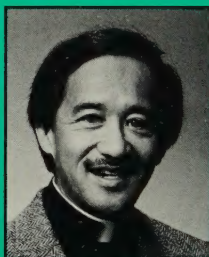
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# HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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## CONTENTS

---

5

**SPIRITLINKING LEADERSHIP**

Donna J. Markham, O.P., Ph.D.

10

**MINISTRY TO SCRUPULOUS PERSONS**

Joseph Ciarrocchi, Ph.D.

16

**DOUBTING AS A STEP TOWARD SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

Reverend Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, Ph.D.

19

**WHEN TWILIGHT COMES, I AM STILL YEARNING**

James Torrens, S.J.

22

**EMBODIED LOVE IN CELIBATE MINISTRY**

John P. Mossi, S.J., D.Min.

27

**DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES IN MATURE YEARS**

Mary Elizabeth Kenel, Ph.D.

31

**REFLECTIONS ON RETIREMENT**

Nathan R. Kollar, S.T.D.

35

**A RETREAT FOR THE SEXUALLY ABUSED**

Julie A. Hollitt, F.D.N.S.C.

37

**SPIRITUAL HEALING FOR BEREAVED PARENTS**

Reverend William L. Wolkovich

40

**A LESSON IN REALISM**

William Schock, S.J.

44

**CLOSING THE FAMILY HOME**

Patrick J. McDonald, M.S.W.

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2

**EDITORIAL BOARD**

3

**EDITOR'S PAGE**

In Search of the Heart

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Authors are responsible for the completeness and accuracy of proper names in both text and bibliography. Acknowledgments must be given when substantial material is quoted from other publications. Provide author name(s), title of article, title of journal or book, volume number, page(s), month and year, and publisher's permission to use material.

Illustrations, if any, should be submitted as high-quality, glossy, unmounted black and white photographic prints. Do not send original artwork.

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# EDITOR'S PAGE

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## IN SEARCH OF THE HEART

If you happen to pass through a United Airlines terminal at one of our country's major airports this season—for example, in Chicago or San Francisco—you will find yourself on the receiving end of one of the most effective advertising messages ever delivered. What you will see suspended from the ceiling is a display of dozens of strikingly artistic portraits of smiling United employees. At the bottom of each heroic-size photograph, the individual's name, job title, and home city appear in large lettering—followed by the single word that explains why all the faces are radiating such unambiguous joy: *owner*.

After years of seesaw negotiations, United's employees are now, finally, the owners of the airline. The message that all those portraits communicate to late-summer passengers is unmistakable: "We're ecstatically happy about what's just happened." I think you would find it hard to look at their beaming faces and not empathically feel some joy along with them. My own reaction included a wish that I could run into some of these happy people, whether at a ticket counter, boarding area, or cockpit door, and extend to them my heartfelt congratulations. I would also like the staff of United's advertising agency to know that I think they have done a first-rate job of communicating the good news of the airline's restructuring.

While reflecting on those memorable portraits—many as large as seventy or eighty square feet in size—I found myself recalling that the church has been encouraging United's new mode of ownership at least as far back as the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*

(*The Condition of Labor*), which was written by Pope Leo XIII just about a century ago. In that classic document on the Christian understanding of work and the dignity of the worker, the pope emphasized the point that people "always work harder and more readily when they work on that which is their own" (presumably, we can expect a little better service from United's personnel from now on). Pope Pius XI, in a follow-up encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno* (*Reconstructing the Social Order*), recommended a "contract of partnership between workers and employers, which would make employees sharers in ownership, management and profits." Pope John Paul II has recently called this arrangement "shareholding by labor." I wonder if the negotiators for United's employees recognized how closely they were adhering to papal advice.

After that brief recognition of papal teachings, I started wondering what the effect would be if churchgoers went to mass one Sunday and unexpectedly found giant-size photos of their fellow parishioners suspended overhead, with their names and other identifying information presented in bold print—for example, "Natalina D'Ubaldo, housewife, lifelong devoted member of Saint Bridget's Parish," or "Louise Tompkins, R.N., professionally dedicated to providing compassionate care for the sick," or "José Ramirez, carpenter, future permanent companion of the saints in heaven." It would be interesting to explore the reactions of parishioners to such posters, and also to find out from those pictured how they felt when they saw themselves presented in such a dramatic and inspirational way.

It has often been said that a single picture is able to communicate the equivalent of a thousand words. The airport portraits may be accomplishing just that these days. But only a few hours after experi-

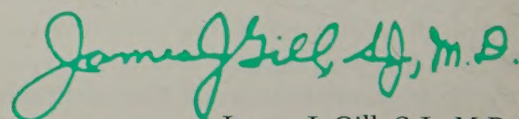


encing them and meditating on their message, I happened to read a newspaper column, one of far fewer than a thousand words, that told me a great deal more about the person described than any giant photo could. The article, written by David Gonzalez for the *New York Times*, was titled "Healer, 93, Retires? Not Quite." In a warm and admiring manner, Gonzalez described Matthew Warpick, a faithful physician who had worked in the same office in Harlem for sixty-seven years. Dr. Warpick had finally been forced to move to another location because of the break-ins, muggings, drug trafficking, and shootings that have turned what was once a pleasant old neighborhood on Manhattan Island into a chaotic zone of deplorable decadence. Tears were streaming down the venerable doctor's cheeks as he closed and locked his office door for the final time; they were matched, Gonzalez reported, by the tears of his patients, many of whom had been treated by him from the time they were children until long after they had become grandparents.

In a few hundred words the *Times* told the story of a man who was *loyal* (he has vowed to his patients that he would never desert them), *kind* (he has told them to pay him only whatever they could), *responsible* ("I've got to keep taking care of the people who have been loyal to me"; "I can't leave them alone"), *self-sacrificing* (he is turning the living room of his apartment into an office where he can continue to see his Harlem patients), and *committed* ("I know I can't change the world, but I'm doing what I can to preserve what little there is left of civilization"). The doctor is also a man with profound gratitude in his heart. In telling Gonzalez about the patients he has been treating during nearly seven decades, he recalled, "They taught me the value of

honesty, good relations and loyalty, which means more to me than money. They respect you in return and shower you with the greatest honor. That means a lot to me."

Yes, a few hundred words can tell us a great deal about someone. They can put us in touch with the human qualities we all need to see modeled or exemplified for us if we are to become the complete persons God created us to be. Certainly, pictures can convey a message—sometimes very powerfully, as United's smiling faces demonstrate. But words, such as those spoken by the wise Harlem physician, can reveal the real depths of a heart. So I think it would be worthwhile for HUMAN DEVELOPMENT to provide our readers with frequent and vivid descriptions of the lives, strivings, and thoughts of mature and admirable persons, so that we can all find inspiration through them. I am therefore asking our writers and readers to begin sending us for publication a steady stream of brief but illuminating biographical vignettes depicting individuals they have come to regard as outstanding in displaying some special qualities or traits. By sharing stories about people we know and admire, we can help one another discover new directions in which to pursue personal growth. And in the pages of HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, we can do what David Gonzalez did for us by sketching the story of Dr. Warpick: in a few hundred words we can offer a loving glance at the best of humanity, along with a glimpse of the divine.



James J. Gill, S.J., M.D.  
Editor-in-Chief

Announcing  
the opening in November 1994  
of  
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offered by  
The Jesuit Educational Center for Human Development  
on the campus of St. John's Seminary  
in Greater Boston, Massachusetts  
  
(see back cover of this issue for information)



# Spiritlinking Leadership

*Donna J. Markham, O.P., Ph.D.*

**R**ecently, during one of my eleventh-hour dashes to the airport, I was trying desperately to retain some semblance of poise as my anxiety escalated to threshold levels. I was anticipating meeting an angry group of health care administrators who, I imagined, would be preparing for the kill when I arrived. They had been informed that their board of directors had mandated “right-sizing” and that a potential merger with another facility was in the offing. I had been sent to facilitate the expression of their feelings.

I caught the plane to the coast and, after several anxious hours, arrived at my destination. Soon I was engaged in a tense series of sessions on conflict management (a wonderful euphemism that day). After spending the next day at the ocean to recuperate from the fray, I flew home.

Upon arriving at the airport, I reached for my keys—not there. I rifled through the wadded pot-pourri of old direction notes, phone messages, and to-do lists in my purse. The keys were definitely not there—must have locked them in the car, I thought. Next came the embarrassing public announcement of my predicament to the van driver, overheard by all the other businesspeople jammed into the parking-lot shuttle (“No problem, lady—I’ll just take you last”).

When I was finally driven to my car, I saw that there were no keys inside it. I proceeded to the main

office. There, on a large piece of tagboard, in the company of dozens of other lost keys, was my key ring, wrapped in a crumpled piece of paper with a rubber band around it. I opened the note and read, “Keys locked in car. Motor running.”

## **ANXIETIES OF LEADERSHIP**

Somehow this incident speaks to me about what it is like to be in leadership—especially health care leadership—today. Running fast, covering lots of territory, trying to keep up the pace, spotting troubles ahead, fighting off loss of control, trying to stay calm. We don’t have the right keys, but the motor keeps running.

Whorls of complexity, unpredictability, disequilibrium, and rapid reconfiguration, compounded by financial uncertainty and fuzzy vision, coalesce to heighten our anxiety. Most of us in health care leadership are acutely aware of the fact that yesterday’s strategies are not only woefully obsolete but downright inane. Where are the right keys?

In these times of ambiguity and extraordinary complexity, when anxiety is high and chaos is all around us, how do those of us in leadership promote human worth, dignity, and creativity? The key for me is “spiritlinking”—the deliberate and untiring act



of building the circle of friends, fostering interconnections of human compassion, and interweaving high-energy networks of relationships through which new ideas are born and new ways of delivering service take form and find expression. The term *spiritlinking* was coined by a group of Dominican women (including myself) who were struggling to find a word that described our experience of the rapidly evolving nature of religious organizations and of religious life itself. For us, the word represents the developing, organic experience of transformation and conversion in response to the call of the gospel. The rapidity of health system realignments and the rapid evolution of integrated delivery networks are other concrete examples of linkages and affiliations that stand to be permeated with gospel values and a commitment to the mission to heal the human community.

### SELF-RENEWAL THROUGH CHAOS

Spiritlinking is about fostering disequilibrium. It is about knowing that stability and order are signs not of organizational health but of institutional death. It is about not being afraid of chaos. It is about believing that chaos is simply a more complex form of an incredibly mysterious order that we are just not able to see yet—an exquisite order that lies just beyond our vision and will emerge unexpectedly and suddenly, when the time is right and we have developed the insight to see it. Leaders who know this are continually engaged in networking, heightening communication, and inviting diverse people from across our organizations to come together to raise the questions that will keep our institutions focused on our mission and protect us from settling into the stultifying comfort of routine. They are willing to generate so much interaction and information that it feels like chaos. They have discovered that the greater the participation of members in any organization, the more access the system has to vast amounts of information and insight, which will ultimately lead it into a profound self-renewal through what previously seemed opaque, chaotic, and inaccessible. Leaders who understand spiritlinking believe that each person in the system is a conduit of organizational energy—an expression of the spirit, values, culture, and ethics of the whole.

### PROMOTION OF UNITY

Spiritlinking leaders are not structured into rigid patterns of relating. They are not bound by cookie-cutter organizational charts. They do not define their relationships with employees by their authority, nor

do they define persons by their authority relative to the chief executive. These leaders are profoundly aware that each person in the organization is a “high-energy particle” with something to contribute to the wisdom of the whole. They trust that it is precisely because of the employees’ collective inner wonder, inquisitiveness, and spirit that new forms will emerge, new ways of doing business will develop, and massive energy will be freed to serve the healing mission of the church more deliberately and more effectively. Spiritlinking leaders foster the dignity of each person in the organization and cultivate the dignity of the organization itself in its mission of service to the suffering, the lonely, and the most vulnerable among us.

Today’s leadership is about unifying and linking persons for the sake of the future quality and dignity of life for all living beings. Good leaders promote unity by believing in the worth and value of each employee. There is no place in leadership today for individuals who are locked into attitudes of self-importance and narcissism and whose lines of communication are restricted to top management. Organizations run by such people will not survive, because these leaders limit the staff’s spirit, disengage its energy, and strand themselves on self-protected turf. While I believe that authority and leadership are essential to the functioning of any group, I am utterly convinced that rigidly structured hierarchic authority lines that promote stability and order will ultimately doom any group. This will happen because synergistic, highly creative imagining and decision making are thwarted by limited communication, limited access to information, and a lack of openness and respect for the contributions of each and every member. Consequently, the group suffers from loss of morale and attrition of personnel.

### LOVING INTERACTION

Spiritlinking jolts us out of rigid, hierarchic maintenance structures and propels us into an electrified cyberspace where invisible yet powerfully real mountains of information and reservoirs of high energy are there for our taking. Spiritlinking creates charged webs of interaction in which each person’s worth, value, and dignity are not only affirmed but also celebrated. Within the Dominican order, our efforts to foster communication across the workfield, to share information, and to refrain from secrecy have led us to the establishment of a community committed to the healing of a torn world whose denizens walk through our doors daily. Our patients sense that they have entered an institution where spiritlinking is a reality. They feel it as they relate to each employee. We might call it “ambience” or “quality” or “culture”;



regardless, we know we are leading well when we hear patients reflect their sense of feeling happy, valued, and respected by the housekeepers, groundskeepers, physicians, and nurses. Most significant, spiritlinking is about loving. It is about loving what we are doing, and it is about loving the human life that fills and drives our institutions. Nothing ensures quality and excellence so well. But we need skills to engage in spiritlinking.

## **SKILLS FOR SPIRITLINKING**

The skills to manage vision, to create synergy, to sustain creative conflict, and to work through resistance to transformative change in order to strengthen the circle of friends are needed if we are to lead well. We hear a lot about vision these days. At one point, I believed that the role of the leader was to imagine some clear destination that the organization would arrive at within a given amount of time, inspire enough enthusiasm within the group to enable it to move forward, and then trust that together we would somehow get there.

In my next phase of thinking about visioning, I thought that with the right kind of facilitation, we could together arrive at a vision of a clear, preferred future. Because we had all participated in creating the vision statement, I thought, we would all be able to move to accomplish it. I believed that the more clarity we had, the greater chance there was of achieving that preferred state. I must admit, however, that I now think this is not only impossible but also undesirable. There can be no fixed vision, no preferred state. There can only be visionary direction that is profoundly faithful to the reason we are in business—faithful to addressing the critical needs we were founded to meet.

## **VISIONING PROVIDES DIRECTION**

Vision, at best, is fuzzy business. I am sure that each of us has had the experience of going to work on a morning when the trees and the streets are shrouded in fog. There is a strange, eerie beauty in that experience, but also an edgy discomfort, because we are not absolutely certain of what lies ahead. We know there is something in the distance, but we aren't sure exactly what's out there. We can see just far enough ahead to keep on moving forward. Although no metaphor or image is ever precise, my image of vision has become one of a fog rather than of a well-defined destination. Like fog, vision sweeps into every corner of an organization; light and energy are reflected in and around everyone and everything that is encompassed by it. Boundaries and outlines

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**To lead well, we must  
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and work through  
resistance to  
transformative change**

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are neither clear nor precise. Destinations are impossible to see clearly, but we have a sense of the direction in which we're heading. Visions, foggy though they may be, surround and are absorbed by each employee and each workspace, and are transmitted and diffused as they link all parts of the organization together. We feel the vision in our being. Like fog, a vision assumes different shapes and always seems to be in some kind of mysterious motion as it hovers over and permeates the vista and seeks out low-lying, remote areas into which it can expand.

Spiritlinking both happens in the fog and creates the vision. Leaders generate courage and the belief that as long as we are connected and unified in single-minded commitment to the mission, we will cease our doubting and embrace what is yet hazy and amorphous, swirling and fuzzy, but filled with potential and possibility. In order for this happen, leaders must eliminate the impact of fear on those who work with us. Fear of making mistakes, fear of doing something differently, fear of thinking creatively, fear of getting lost for a little while, fear of conflict—all these fears serve to return us to the certainty of safe yet deadly order and stability. Spiritlinking demands a high tolerance for ambiguity and a willingness to sustain belief through cloudiness.

Repeatedly calling on our institutions to clarify their mission and purpose, as well as to articulate their most cherished and deeply held values, ensures that our visionary direction is maintained. In an organization in which that sort of integrity pervades the lives and hearts of each employee, the most vulnerable will indeed be served as new forms and structures inevitably emerge and coalesce.



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## To lead in these times inspires a profound belief in the inherent order and magnificently orchestrated beauty of apparent chaos

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### SYNERGY FROM CONFLICT

Synergistic decision making, alive within an organization, makes spiritlinking happen. Most of us learned some time ago that unilateral decision making inevitably precipitates organizational revolt. We learned to consult, to engage in participative sessions based on principles of subsidiarity. We learned to engage in consensus so that conflict was minimized and more people took ownership of collective decisions. But although consensus allowed everyone to live with such decisions, it often resulted in decisions that no one really felt passionate about—and without passion, excitement, and energy, there is no commitment. Unfortunately, many of the organizational failures we experienced arose from consensus decisions. At the outset we felt happy about having arrived at a mutually agreeable solution and having minimized conflict. Later we were puzzled to discover, at the time of evaluation, that we had apparently been unable to implement the decision. If we had all agreed, why couldn't we put it into operation? The problem was that no one believed deeply that the decision should be carried out, so no one felt compelled to alter the status quo. Today we must move beyond consensus, which has often led us to mediocrity. Spiritlinking happens in the midst of synergy.

Leaders who unabashedly gather strong-minded, creative, self-assured individuals who perhaps hold vastly differing perspectives will create an organization capable of making and implementing decisions. We must reenvision our stereotypical perception of conflict—that it is to be resolved, avoided, that it says something is terribly wrong—if we are to move toward the discontinuity and unpredictability that synergistic decision making will generate. Decisions that

emerge from synergy are often surprises. They arise from unimagined connections between disparate pieces of information. They take form out of the chaos of information overload and heated discussions that generate enormous amounts of energy. Synergy happens when the secret poets, physicists, artists, and organizational analysts are allowed to emerge from within us to offer insight and perspective. The challenge for leaders is to become comfortable with the confusion of synergy and the creativity of conflicting views. Spiritlinking happens in the midst of synergistic, conflict-generating, risk-taking thinking and discussion. We begin to hear “What if we” far more often than “Why should we.”

### RESISTANCE OFTEN HOPEFUL SIGN

Spiritlinking draws an organization closer to the achievement of its mission. As the organization draws close to the heart of the matter, as it senses the risks involved in enflashing its mission at a given moment in history, internal resistance intensifies. Resistance builds in proportion to the extent that the organization puts into practice more incisive and powerful new ways of realizing its mission, values, and visions. An agitated resistance to organizational transformation does not signal that there is something wrong in the organization. It lets us know that something is very right.

Understandably, people are simply apprehensive about the consequences of letting go of past forms, structures, and procedures. In a stunning book entitled *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organizations from an Orderly Universe*, Margaret Wheatley captures this feeling exquisitely:

I, too, can feel the ground shaking. I hear its deep rumblings. Any moment now, the earth will crack open and I will stare into its dark center. Into that smiling caldera I will throw most of what I have treasured, most of the techniques and tools that have made me feel competent. I cannot do that yet; I cannot just heave everything I know into the abyss. But I know it is coming. . . .

Leaders who understand these powerful emotions and know the importance of these moments of resistance have the potential to bond the organization in ways as organically strong as the stuff of which webs are made. By working through resistance, these leaders edge the group toward transformation. They link information and hearts and energy in an ever-deepening commitment to the mission and the vision, blurry though it may be.

Resistance happens when we become fearful, when we are confronted with imminent loss and



grief, when we are faced with a call to be more than we think we can be. Resistance occurs when we come face-to-face with an invitation to personal conversion and organizational transformation. An agitated, even irascible resistance is, paradoxically, a wonderfully hopeful sign in any group.

Stable, low-conflict, static groups experience a different type of resistance. It does not have an agitated quality. In these groups, organizational stagnation results from too much security and self-satisfaction. I believe that this is the most difficult resistance for any group to work through, because the organization has already entered into decay.

**WORKING THROUGH RESISTANCE**

Spiritlinking through resistance entails a threefold process: naming the manner in which the organization is manifesting resistance (the mode); calling the group to explore what might be happening now to cause the organization to resist in this way (the motive); and exploring together what the consequences might be if the group continues in its resistant pattern (the meaning). Examination of the mode, motive, and meaning of resistant organizational behaviors fosters communion in the midst of frightening moments. Obstacles that could never be surmounted by one individual can be overcome by a group of persons who feel connected to one another. Working through resistance becomes a means by which persons corporately begin to feel the excitement of approaching transformative vision.

Visioning, synergy, disequilibrium, community, conflict, and agitated resistance become spiritlinks that usher in transformation. To be leaders in these times is a sacred privilege that inspires a profound belief in the inherent order and magnificently orchestrated beauty of apparent chaos. To lead now affords us the humbling opportunity to foster the sort of community that a broken world so desperately craves.

In *Leadership and the New Science*, Margaret Wheatley eloquently addresses the hope and promise that we in leadership can witness to those whose lives we touch:

Healing waters will cover the land, giving birth to new life, burying forever the ancient, rusting machines of our past understandings. And on these waters [we] will set sail to places [we] only now imagine. There [we] will be blessed with new visions and new magic. [We] will feel once again like . . . creative contributor[s] to this mysterious world. But for now, [we] wait. An act of faith. Land ho.



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# Ministry to Scrupulous Persons

Joseph Ciarrocchi, Ph.D.

**S**crupulosity, or excessive concern about moral transgressions, represents a major problem in ministry and the field of mental health. Individuals who suffer from the condition, and those who counsel them, are often unaware that the problem can be a manifestation of a serious emotional condition—obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Consequently, affected individuals often seek spiritual “solutions” to problems that are psychological in origin. Alternatively, if the sufferer turns to a mental health professional, the religious symptoms may lead the professional either to misunderstand the symptoms or to identify religious beliefs as the cause of the disorder.

This article presents a brief overview of scrupulosity, its patterns, its relationship to faith, and its role in the broader problem of OCD. Finally, it will discuss pastoral care strategies for dealing with the complex symptoms typically encountered in ministry.

In *Grace Abounding*, spiritual master John Bunyan vividly conveys the inner terror of the scrupulous:

In those days, when I have heard others talk of what was the sin against the Holy Ghost, then would the tempter so provoke me to desire to sin that sin, that I was as if I could not, must not, neither should be quiet until I had committed it; now no sin would serve but that. If it were to be committed by speaking of such a

word, then I have been as if my mouth would have spoken that word, whether I would or no; and in so strong a measure was this temptation upon me, that often I have been ready to clap my hand under my chin, to hold my mouth from opening; and to that end also, I have had thoughts at other times, to leap with my head downward, into some muckhill-hole or other, to keep my mouth from speaking.

Bunyan is describing a characteristic feature of scrupulosity: *an intrusive idea, often associated with a sinful impulse, which the person abhors but cannot shake*. This obsession to commit the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost, as well as the temptation to “sell Christ,” tormented Bunyan’s spiritual life for nearly three years. His poignant phrasing of this torment gives those of us who do not suffer from the condition some sense of the person’s despair. “And now was I both a burden and a terror to myself; nor did I ever so know, as now, what it was to be weary of my life, and yet afraid to die”—Bunyan tells the reader that in his depression he wants to die, but divine condemnation prevents him. The sad fate of the scrupulous is that their faith is a source of terror rather than comfort.

History records that other notable figures suffered from scrupulosity, even if temporarily. They include Martin Luther and Saint Ignatius Loyola.



Scrupulosity sits at the crossroads of religion and mental health. The scrupulous may turn either to religious or mental health professionals for guidance and find that they are fully understood by neither group. While many mental health professionals respect the individual's faith experience, the fact remains that the proportion of nonbelievers among mainstream mental health professionals far exceeds that among the general population. In my volunteer work with the Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Foundation, I have had telephone conversations with scrupulous persons representing various faith groups. Many report that therapists told them religion was the cause of their problem and that they would improve if they gave up their religion.

On the other hand, well-intentioned ministers and spiritual counselors may not have the necessary tools to provide effective help. Indeed, as we shall see, some religious practices may reinforce the pathology. Yet referral alone to a mental health professional is often not a solution, because the person may not trust a therapist's judgment on religious or moral matters. Effective help often necessitates ongoing pastoral care in conjunction with competent mental health counseling.

#### RELATED TO ANXIETY

The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (3rd ed., revised) presents the traditional definition of obsession: "persistent ideas, thoughts, impulses, or images that are experienced, at least initially, as intrusive or senseless." The manual gives as examples a parent's repeated impulse to kill a loved child, or a religious person's recurrent blasphemous thoughts. Compulsions are defined as "repetitive, purposeful, and intentional behaviors that are performed in response to an obsession, according to certain rules, or in a stereotyped fashion."

A somewhat different definition is emerging in the clinical field, however, and will probably be incorporated in the manual's upcoming revision. In this newer model, obsessions are seen as acts, thoughts, or images that trigger anxiety, whereas compulsions are acts, thoughts, or images that reduce anxiety. For example, seeing a household solvent may trigger the notion that I should pour it into my baby's milk formula (obsession), which results in my locking up all cleansers and detergents and giving my spouse the key (compulsion).

While obsessive-compulsive patterns are infinite, clinicians tend to see three common ones. The first is *fear of dirt*, which causes the individual to worry that uncleanness will contaminate self or others. The per-

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son spends considerable time cleaning, sterilizing, and being concerned with soaps and antiseptics. To relieve anxiety, the person avoids places or situations that might result in contamination. For some sufferers this creates an apparent paradox: they are so fearful of germs that they live in filth for fear of contamination from the cleaning process.

A second common obsession is a *preoccupation about safety*—whether one's own or that of others. Some individuals with this obsession drive at excessively slow speeds to avoid endangering others. For others, hitting a bump in a road necessitates driving to the nearest exit on the highway to turn around and search for the imagined pedestrian's body. One patient told me that he had spent the morning searching for a boy he was convinced he had killed while walking down a crowded city street.

A third category of obsessions concerns *unacceptable thoughts*, often with violent, sexual, or blasphemous themes. A new mother may imagine purposely scalding her baby in the bath; a father may envision sexual images when he interacts with his children; a person may have obscene or blasphemous thoughts about God while praying. Several years ago, during the intensive search for the infamous killer in the so-called Atlanta child murders, three of my patients "confessed" that they were the killers. Even though my office was more than a thousand miles away from the crime scene, each believed he had committed the crime in a sleepwalking state. None seemed bothered by the logistical problem of catching a plane to Atlanta in the middle of the night and waking up next to his spouse each morning without arousing suspicion.



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## Scrupulous persons often regard morally neutral acts as sinful, or else they believe that they have engaged in immoral action or thought

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While obsessions and compulsions are the structural components of OCD, the driving force behind the disorder is the person's pathological doubting. All of us, after all, experience unusual or even bizarre thoughts on occasion. The fertility of the human mind allows even the most intellectually limited person to create imaginative scenes or flights of fancy. The difference between the OCD sufferer and the nonsufferer, however, is that the ordinary person can easily dismiss the intrusive idea and trust his or her perceptions. OCD sufferers lose the ability to know if they know; they no longer trust their senses or judgment (Did I really lock the front door, turn off the gas stove, pull the plug on the iron?).

In the religious domain, scrupulosity refers to an excessive preoccupation with sin. Scrupulous persons often regard morally neutral acts as sinful, or else they erroneously believe that they have engaged in immoral action or thought. For example, they may believe that the biblical precept "love your neighbor" requires that they say "Good morning" to everyone in the office each day, whether or not they know all those present. If they fail to greet even one person, they feel they have offended God and can therefore expect to be punished.

In the second case the person experiences an intrusive thought but cannot trust his or her judgment regarding personal intentions: Did I take delight in that sexual fantasy? Was I willfully distracted during prayer? Did I commit "adultery of the heart" when I looked at that attractive person in the beer commercial? Or, as Bunyan agonized, Did I commit the unpardonable sin?

Some forms of scrupulosity represent transitional states. Adolescents, for example, may experience a

stage of exquisite moral sensitivity during which they adopt inordinate moral standards. This represents a normal developmental passage as the youngster experiments with a variety of moral value systems prior to establishing a stable personal one. Adults may also experience scrupulosity as a developmental stage during intensive spiritual searching or in the process of a conversion experience. These developmental episodes are amenable to effective pastoral care practices such as providing information, reflective listening, or simply integration with the passage of time.

Some forms of scrupulosity, however, result from an emotional disorder other than OCD. Many depressed persons experience a pervasive sense of guilt. This guilt often presents itself in the form of rumination over past misdeeds, which may have occurred long ago. The person fixates on these transgressions and may seek pastoral guidance. Post-traumatic stress disorder is also a condition that may involve excessive moral preoccupation. In an attempt to gain control over frightening memories, some individuals become preoccupied with ritual and moral concerns. In such instances, effective treatment for the primary disorder usually eliminates the scrupulous behavior.

### SEVERAL TREATMENTS EFFECTIVE

Several theories exist on the origin of OCD. Freud proposed the major psychological theory, which traces the disorder back to harsh childrearing practices. The classic example in this theory suggests that overly strict toilet training leads to the development of an anal-retentive personality, characterized by obsessional thinking, restricted affect, and a preoccupation with orderliness.

Biological theories focus on structural or biochemical deficiencies in the brain. Some point to right-hemisphere abnormality, whereas others suggest frontal lobe dysfunction. Judith Rapoport, a psychiatrist with the National Institutes of Mental Health, views the dysfunction as part of a faulty feedback loop in the brain. She uses the analogy of brain-damaged birds who continue to build nests and engage in ritual cleaning long after the task is complete. While much research continues in both the psychological and biological realms, the jury is still out on a definitive cause.

Modern clinical science has had somewhat more success in treating OCD than in understanding its origins. While no one yet claims a cure, at least two treatment approaches demonstrate promise for alleviating the symptoms of OCD. The first involves pharmacological intervention. Several medications



have helped a number of sufferers, and the results are now confirmed through controlled studies. Anti-depressants have the best track record to date; the most widely prescribed are clomipramine hydrochloride (Anafranil) and fluoxetine (Prozac). However, psychiatrists have found that a newer anti-anxiety agent, buspirone (Buspar), as well as the older, traditional antidepressants, have helped some OCD sufferers. A recent study conducted at Massachusetts General Hospital also found that medications significantly helped 7 out of 10 scrupulous Catholic and Jewish patients.

The psychological treatment with the most promise in treating OCD is behavioral therapy. Such treatment is based on the notion that OCD sufferers avoid or defend themselves against events that represent little actual risk. Because they do not avail themselves of the opportunity to engage in the threatening behavior (e.g., by washing hands only before handling food or after bathroom use), they cannot disconfirm their faulty beliefs. One is reminded of the old vaudeville routine updated by the Sesame Street characters Bert and Ernie. Bert, seeing that Ernie has stuck a banana in his ear, asks him why. Ernie replies that it is to keep the alligators out of Central Park. When Bert tells him there are no alligators in Central Park, Ernie retorts, "See, it works!"

Behavioral treatment, therefore, is geared toward having the person face the threatening event without engaging in the defensive behavior. A father who is convinced that he has poisoned the food in his refrigerator would be asked to prepare the evening meal for his family; a woman who is afraid she will kill her children with a blunt object is told to leave the clothes iron out in plain view when the children are around. This strategy, known as *response prevention*, consists of two parts. First, the person exposes himself or herself to the frightening situation; second, the person prevents himself or herself from performing the defensive maneuver usually used to deal with the event. While at first this may prove frightening, the anxiety level gradually drops, and the person manages to cope with the feared situation. Naturally, considerable therapeutic skill is required to develop initial goals that the client can manage.

## PASTORAL CARE GUIDELINES

An intriguing historical note in the pastoral care of the scrupulous comes from the Roman Catholic tradition of training ministers for the sacrament of Reconciliation. In past centuries, training manuals for seminarians and confessors provided guidelines for pastoral care of the scrupulous. Such persons were viewed as having an erroneous conscience,

## Effective pastoral care of scrupulosity incorporates insights from the behavioral sciences regarding its management

and this was considered an emotional problem rather than a moral one. The manuals instructed confessors to take a firm stand with the scrupulous, particularly with regard to their desire to misuse the sacrament. For example, confessors limited confession for the scrupulous according to strict guidelines. They forbade them to make use of multiple confessors. They told them not to enumerate their sins, in order to discourage obsessing about sin and numbers. They also limited the frequency of confession (as the disease caused the scrupulous to doubt that they had made a "good" confession, they would often repeat confessions far beyond standard devotional practice; pastoral practice viewed this use of confession as ritualistic rather than spiritual). Confessors further advised penitents to confess their sins "as God sees them," thereby providing a positive guide. The church's pastoral practice, therefore, anticipated behavioral therapy by several centuries by "preventing" such penitents from engaging in the compulsive response that alleviated their anxiety (namely, the act of confessing).

Effective pastoral care of scrupulosity, therefore, will incorporate insights from the behavioral sciences regarding its management. The following guidelines are suggested in the light of this information.

### **Assess the nature and severity of the scrupulosity.**

First determine whether the scruples are only religious in nature or whether they affect other domains as well. If the person has other compulsions (e.g., cleaning, checking), he or she may have a broad mental health problem requiring treatment. Also, assess the severity of the scrupulosity itself. What is the frequency, intensity, duration, and per-



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## Scrupulosity is not a disorder of cognition but one of emotion; persuading the scrupulous to change their image of God will not eliminate the problem

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vasiveness of the problem? How much do the symptoms interfere with daily routine? Are they merely an annoyance, or do they represent significant pain? Severe conditions require referral to a qualified mental health professional.

**Understand the psychological function of the scrupulous symptoms.** As noted earlier, in the newer conception of these symptoms, an obsession is an act, thought, or image that triggers anxiety, whereas a compulsion is an act, thought, or image that reduces anxiety. The religious scruple or doubt triggers anxiety, which the person tries to relieve by a ritualistic response. This ritual can be mental or behavioral—that is, internal or external. The person may say a prayer or engage in another mental “corrective” to the intrusive obsession. Or else the person might engage in some external religious devotion (e.g., confession) for the same purpose.

Therefore, when a client talks about his or her scrupulous behavior, break it down into its component parts. What part of the symptom represents the obsession, and what part the compulsion? The logic of an intervention is simple: use any means available to help the person prevent the ritual. However, this model suggests that if the person ceases the ritual, the anxiety only increases. Experience and research teach us that the person can learn to live with the anxiety because it decreases with repeated ritual prevention.

**Do not allow the scrupulous person to use religious practices as a compulsion.** Always recom-

mend against repeating any religious practice, whether public or private. The scrupulous often feel impelled to repeat prayers or services because of a belief that the first effort was unworthy in some manner. For example, some may repeat prayers, as they believe their prayers lack merit because of distractions. When personal devotions consume excessive amounts of time, the counselor can advise the client to set strict time limits. For those who have difficulty setting limits, the use of a common kitchen timer can be recommended.

**Prevent the scrupulous from using the pastoral care interaction as a compulsion.** This “doubting disease,” as some have called it, often impels the scrupulous to seek reassurance regarding their doubts: Did I truly sin? If I consider the problem of evil, does this mean I doubt God’s goodness? The scrupulous, quite naturally, try to relieve the anxiety created by their doubts. They often seek reassurance from the pastoral minister or religious counselor. For them, however, simple reassurance is ineffective. They require repeated assurances that they have not sinned or are in good standing. The minister needs to comment on the process, to acknowledge what the scrupulous person is seeking, yet indicate to the person the futility of that approach. I have told clients that if God appeared in person to relieve the individual’s doubts, new doubts would emerge five minutes later. The scrupulous person would question whether God had gotten the correct information to make the judgment. Gently but firmly point out that seeking repeated reassurance is counterproductive. Inform the person that you will limit your interactions to scheduled meetings of a specific duration, with a set agenda.

Teaching the client the model outlined here is often quite helpful. When the person understands the function of his or her symptoms, he or she is often more willing to cooperate in the process. Once the client understands this model, the counselor can employ it to provide a basis for limit setting. I tell clients that when they engage in their rituals—which include seeking repeated reassurance—they are pouring gasoline on the fire. A ritual provides only temporary relief, and the urge to repeat becomes stronger with each lapse.

**Respect the person’s spiritual/theological model.** While scrupulous persons often have spiritual/theological models that strike the minister as rigid or unenlightened, a direct assault on these models is counterproductive. Scrupulosity is not a disorder of cognition but one of emotion. Persuading the scrupulous to change their image of God will not



eliminate the problem. If anything, this strategy leads to fruitless discussions regarding dogma or liberal/conservative debates. Even though the counselor's desire to expand the patient's view of God as loving and nurturing is laudable, the wiser strategy is to view this as a long-term goal. Otherwise, counselor and client engage in side skirmishes that do not address the problem directly.

Similarly, maintaining a middle-of-the-road theological position within one's tradition also prevents confusion. While all faith groups have cherished doctrines, engaging in care of the scrupulous means not being a doctrinaire. Any thoughtful minister will instantly recognize that these individuals are tormented by rigid moral standards, and the last thing they need is having further burdens placed on them.

**Encourage participation in support groups when available.** The OCD Foundation will provide information on self-help meetings available for persons with the disorder. People with OCD suffer a particular form of shame: most view their symptoms as strange and bizarre, and they rarely feel free to share their experiences with others for fear of ridicule. Yet most people with OCD are intelligent, sensitive, and articulate. Developing a supportive network is often the first step in addressing their problems. If no group exists in your area, the foundation can provide information on establishing one.

Perhaps the saddest fallout from OCD is that many sufferers feel they must abandon their faith to obtain any measure of relief. When these persons share with me the stories of their life journeys, I can appreciate how they arrived at that painful decision. They face the dilemma of maintaining membership in a formal religious organization or main-

taining their mental health. Knowledge about OCD from behavioral science, as well as modern treatment, can restore personal freedom to sufferers faced with this decision. With skillful application of up-to-date information, the pastoral minister can play an important role in enabling scrupulous persons to regain this freedom.

*The OCD Foundation, a nonprofit organization, publishes a newsletter, provides professional referral resources, and coordinates local support groups for persons with OCD. For information, write to the OCD Foundation, P.O. Box 9573, New Haven, CT 06535.*

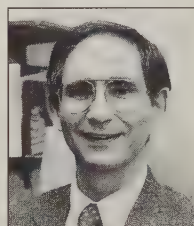
*Scrupulous Anonymous (Liguori, MO 63057) is a newsletter published by the Redemptorists, with self-help articles for the scrupulous.*

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# Doubting as a Step Toward Spiritual Growth

*Reverend Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, Ph.D.*

**S**omeone once remarked that two sorts of people please God: those who serve God with all their heart because they know God, and those who seek God with all their heart because they do not know God. Christians of all sorts—whether parishioners or priests, religious or laypersons—are both finders and seekers of God. We are finders of God, any of us who have been drawn, however briefly, into a sense of wonder and awe before the living Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being. And we are all seekers of God, too: people who, time and again, need to confess our foibles and failures, people who hunger for a deeper intimacy with the Holy One, people who wrestle with all kinds of questions and doubts. At one time or another, many Christians have been members of churches that allowed no room for questions or doubts, churches that taught their members to be ashamed of their doubts and to keep them secret—but as novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner once put it, “If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.”

The story of Doubting Thomas in the gospel of John is for all of us who dare to admit that sometimes we have doubts—doubts, perhaps, about the goodness of God, doubts about the Resurrection, or doubts about the living presence of Christ. Thomas is

the disciple who gives voice to our doubt. He is the one who is unwilling to settle for someone else's testimony about the Risen Lord. For him, it is not enough when his friends report, “We have seen the Lord.” Thomas insists, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25).

## FACING OUR DOUBTS

Somewhere along the line, we may have been taught to view Thomas with just a touch of contempt. After all, as Christians, we hope to be people who are deepening in faith, and here is a disciple who shamelessly admits that he has some doubts. Thomas—and all those like him, who are willing to express their doubts—may make us uncomfortable by reminding us of our own doubts, and so we flinch and draw back. To shield our faith, we may be tempted to look down upon the Thomases in our lives or to brush them aside. But I believe that both the disciple Thomas and the Thomas that we all carry within ourselves deserve our sympathetic attention and our respect. To entertain doubt is to be spiritually alive. Through the grace of God, our doubts can draw us to God just as surely as our faith can.



This may sound very strange. Obviously, our faith can draw us to God, but most of us are wary of our doubts. We tend to think of doubt as an obstacle to faith, not a vehicle of faith. And so we force ourselves to ignore our doubts, and we anxiously grip whatever faith we can muster.

But does doubt really need to be an enemy of faith? Can doubt be transformed from a wall that blocks us from God, to a doorway that opens us to the divine? What are some ways of being faithful to doubt that can actually deepen our faith?

## HONORING YOUR DOUBTS

I would like to offer three suggestions for working skillfully with doubt. The first suggestion is this: Honor your doubt. Listen to your doubt. As Frederick Buechner also said, let your doubt be the ants in the pants of your faith. Or, to change the metaphor, let your doubt be the wind at your back that propels you toward the holy mystery of God. Doubt can be a wake-up call to faith.

Perhaps we are troubled by doubts about some aspect of Christian doctrine or belief. If so, I hope we will honor those doubts. Perhaps they are a signal to learn more about current theology, an invitation to realize that good people of faith have come to understand Christian doctrine in very different ways. The last formal Christian education that many of us received may have been back in eighth-grade Sunday school. No wonder we now chafe under the uncomfortable sense that our God is too small. Certainly, we have grown and matured since the eighth grade, but many of us continue to labor under some outdated theology or maintain childish conceptions of what we are “supposed” to believe and to accept as truth.

Doubt can be good news: it can be a sign that we are moving from the stage of passively *receiving* our faith, of accepting what our elders or teachers told us simply because they said it was so, to *appropriating* our faith and making it our own. Doubt may signal the birth pangs of a mature faith. If we are to honor our doubts, then we may need to dive more deeply into the life of the mind and learn more about contemporary theology.

On the other hand, sometimes the way to honor our doubts is to recognize that we have reached the limit of what the human intellect can understand. The doubts that assail us painfully in the middle of the night are generally not neat little questions about Christian doctrine. Instead, they tend to be urgent, personal, significant questions that cannot be answered adequately simply by reading a book or memorizing a creed.

Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why has someone I love died? Why am I going to die? Is there really a God? Does God really love me? Questions like these are not resolved by glib, intellectual answers. The big questions of life cannot finally be grasped by the intellect alone. So when we are aware of our doubts, aware of our questions, it means that we have come to the edge of a great mystery. One of the great mystics, the unidentified author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, emphasized that “By love may [God] be caught and held, but by thinking never.” It is a sacred moment when we confess that our intellect can go only so far and no further.

## PRAYING ABOUT DOUBT

This brings me to my second suggestion about how we can make our doubt draw us to God, and that is to pray our doubts. Doubts are part of who we are, and if we want to grow closer to God, if we want to be real with God, we must be willing to share our doubts with God in prayer. C. S. Lewis once observed that “the prayer preceding all prayers is ‘May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.’” Our intention in prayer is to be our real selves and to encounter the real God—not our ideas about God, nor our concepts of God, and much less our projections and fantasies about God. If the “real me” is full of doubts, then that is the prayer I have been given to pray. Like the anguished father in the gospel of Mark (9:24), I must learn to cry to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

Doubt is a form of spiritual pain, and we can pray our doubt in much the same way that we might pray any physical pain. How do we do that? By leaning into the doubt, breathing into it, going into its center. We do not flee from our doubt or deny it or avoid it. We let it be exactly what it is. As we gently bring careful attention to our doubt and share it very simply and honestly, with God, we may eventually notice that something is hiding behind the doubt.

For example, maybe anger is behind the doubt: maybe I discover in prayer that what is really troubling me is not that I doubt the reality or the goodness of God but that I am angry with God. Or maybe I discover in prayer that what lies behind my doubt of God’s presence or God’s care for me is a deep sense of abandonment and loss and grief. Or perhaps behind my doubt there lurks some kind of fear—maybe the fear of commitment or the fear of taking myself seriously as a spiritual being.

When we pray our doubts, we open ourselves to discovering the feelings that lie beneath the doubt, and then those feelings become our prayer. We pray our anger, our grief, our fears. As in any friendship,



it is often through sharing our feelings with God that our relationship with God is freed to become more intimate and more authentic. For many people, risking their feelings in prayer—daring to reveal and express their honest feelings with God, however painful or shameful those feelings may be—is what brings their relationship with God to life again. Doubt can turn out to be the doorway through which we discover a new, deeper, and more authentic relationship with God.

## MOVING BEYOND DOUBT

My third and final suggestion is this: Be ready to move past your doubt. Please note that I am not urging that we suppress or squelch our doubt or force it away. That would be to avoid the truth and to pretend to be people we are not. But after we honor our doubt and pray our doubt, there may be a time when God invites us to move past our doubt. There may be a time when we realize that doubt is holding us back from God and keeping us from even dipping our toes into the ocean of God's love.

"Come and see. Come and see." That is what Jesus said over and over again to the people who paused to look at him, and who wondered who he was and what he was up to. "Come and see"—come and discover for yourselves what Rudolf Otto, in his classic work *The Idea of the Holy*, called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—the awesome and rapturous mystery of God. "Come and see," says Jesus. "Come and see."

Doubting Thomas is one of my favorite of Jesus' disciples. He is the one who wouldn't settle for secondhand reports about the resurrection of Christ but wanted to know God in and through his own experience. He wanted to see and to touch for himself. And how did Jesus respond? Jesus welcomed him. "Put your finger here," he said, "and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe" (John 20:27).

Jesus invites us to do the same thing. He invites us to explore and to trust our own experience and to discover his presence for ourselves. For some of us, exploring and trusting our experience are not easy to do. For one thing, we may have been taught to rely on some external authority for religious knowledge rather than to examine our own lives. To make matters worse, some of us come from dysfunctional families that taught us not to trust our senses, our feel-

ings, or our imaginations, and certainly not our heart's desires. We may have learned early on not to trust what we saw or heard or felt, to pay no attention to what was right before our eyes, to ignore our deepest longings. It takes a long time to unlearn such lessons.

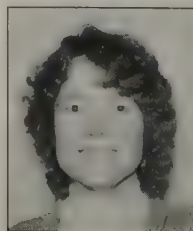
## SEEING FOR OURSELVES

But Jesus says to us, "Come and see. Come explore your own experience. Come learn to pray. Come learn to trust your feelings. Come learn to listen to, and to trust, the deepest desire of your heart, which is the desire for love, the desire for wholeness, the desire for God. Do not be afraid of your doubts," he says to us, "but come and see."

Whether we think of ourselves as people who are seeking God or as people who have found God—whether at present we are wrestling with doubt or filled with faith—the questions before us are the same: Are we honoring our doubts? Are we praying our doubts? And, when the time comes, will we set our doubts aside? When the Living Christ breaks through the closed doors of our minds and hearts, will we hold back from Love? Or, like our brother Thomas, will we utter those words of joyful trust and faith, "My Lord and my God"?

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# When Twilight Comes, I Am Still Yearning

*James Torrens, S.J.*

## **Coming and Going**

*(for Vincent Potter, S.J.)*

This day's the infancy of leaves,  
milk green, buttercup green,  
their minuscule feet uncurling,  
the willow fingerlings.  
Oakleaf with scarce a rib,  
sycamore innocent of grime.  
It happens in a trice—  
bare branches, fuzz, small hands!

Philosopher, old schoolchum,  
typing right to the deadline,  
why pick today to go?  
Is it to throw the blinds  
open on us composed at supper  
and dusted gray?  
Let in what sun you will,  
we'll drift to the TV room  
and nod off at the news.

In the season of swings  
it exercises me,  
this whiff of ash.

**B**efore its completion, my poem "Coming and Going" had in fact been coming onto and going from my desk for weeks, failing to cohere. The situation, the poignant juxtaposition, was clear enough: on the very entrance day of spring, during a pure spurt of vitality, came the death of an old friend and seminary classmate. The real shocker for me, at the time of his funeral, was to recognize the signs of mortality upon the lot of us, his contemporaries, gathered there. I could not get beyond the impression of sadness.

Even the daily psalms and readings from the Liturgy of the Hours seemed, at the time, intent on rubbing in that motif. Here was Job complaining: "My days are but a breath, my days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle. [I once was prominent,] but now they hold me in derision who are younger in years than I." And here too was Psalm 90, a meditation on fragility and on the swift passing of life: "You sweep us away like a dream, / like grass which springs up in the morning. / In the morning it springs up and flowers: / by evening it withers and fades." The great Psalm 103 echoes this insight: "As for man, his days are like grass, / he flowers like the flower of the field; / the wind blows and he is gone / and his place knows him no more."

When much younger, I was an enthusiast for Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, that prolonged celebra-



tion of "the procreative urge" as well as of the democratic citizen. Grass was for Whitman "the produced babe of the vegetation," a hopeful token, even when sprouting from graves. But eventually Whitman gave way to one of the classics I learned singing with the Santa Clara Chorale—the Brahms *Requiem*, with its solemn outcry taken from Isaiah 40: "All flesh is grass."

So here I was in the Virgilian mode: "There are tears in things and mortality troubles the mind." According to Mary Elizabeth Kenel, that is a natural enough place to be: "for the older person, loss and grief seem to become the daily bread of life" ("Loss, Grief and Growth in Life's Later Years," *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT*, Summer 1994). But you can't be stuck there: "to maintain psychological health during the later years, one must learn to grieve quickly and well."

It dawned on me eventually that my poem had been meaning and tending all the while to go further, beyond a sassy flaunting of health in the face of aging and decline and into some hint of light and life, the blessed realm of Christian philosophy. If I could not get the lines into the right order or make them come out right, it was because I had not seen where they were going.

Help came from chancing upon some positive assessments of the twilight years. One morning early, someone on National Public Radio pointed out that among the elderly there is a wide spectrum, or divergence, in the keenness of the senses, the memory, and mental alertness—much wider than among teenagers or young adults. If stimulus is kept up, the report indicated, and if one is surrounded by interesting things or people and lets oneself be affected by them, the cerebral cortex is less likely to go dead. (What an argument against warehousing the elderly!)

Spirit and flesh interact, after all. Those who find things to look forward to, even in the season of aches and illness, will judge their later years to be good times. Some older men, and especially women, freed from a round of duties or chores, turn into redoubtable gray panthers—advocates who move mountains for various causes or add a saving grace as volunteers in institutional settings (I think with admiration of the elderly Filipinos who are foster grandparents to the disabled young at Agnews State Hospital in California). Later life seems also to be the best time for traveling and appreciating. Those who can step from a predominantly active life to one with a heavy focus on contemplation—who can welcome the slowing down and "taste the vanilla," as my father used to say—will enjoy a surplus of being.

Barbara Kingsolver's recent novel *Pigs in Heaven* includes a telling exchange between two older folks

who are falling in love. Alice says: "It's hard to admit to being old, isn't it? I keep thinking, How'd this happen? Sixty-one! When I was young I looked at people this age and thought they must feel different inside . . . like they were wrinkled up and bent and way far along." Her friend Cash responds: "It don't feel that way, though, does it?" "No," Alice says, running a hand through her short hair, "it feels regular." True enough.

Then there's the final scene of *Rabbit at Rest*, the last novel of John Updike's sequence about Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom—ex-basketball star, ex-car salesman—who has a lot of thought to digest about his earlier life, much recasting of attitudes to do, and not the best of equipment for doing it, since he remains adolescent in so many ways. Rabbit's wife, Janice, feels quite "regular"—well enough to go out and get a job in her grandmotherly years. Rabbit, with his bad heart—and "a negative body image and resultant loss of self-esteem," as Kenel puts it—feels "regular" enough at the end to join some boys at a basketball court in a black neighborhood and show them how it's done. He collapses and winds up in the hospital. Maybe he won't survive the exploit, but he will go out with a little glory.

Updike's novel is about the work we have to do in the final stage. This is something that Erik Erikson marked out brilliantly in his essay "Reflections on Dr. Borg's Life Cycle." This essay, which opens the collection he edited, *Adulthood*, closely examines the protagonist of Ingmar Bergman's movie *Wild Strawberries*. In the course of a long journey by car to Lund to receive jubilee honors in the cathedral, Dr. Isak Borg recapitulates his past, bringing its episodes to memory and confronting his lapses. What gets celebrated, at the end of this process and journey, is not really his lifetime of accomplishments but his achievement of a certain wisdom.

Erik Erikson is known, and honored, for tracing the eight stages in the life cycle. Erikson's developmental pattern is, in fact, what the editors of this journal mean to intimate by the title they chose long ago, *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT*. This great and sane figure, trained in the school of Freud, acute in his understanding of children, open to the spiritualities of the world, deserves a moment of appreciation now, having gone to his Creator on May 12 of this year.

According to Erikson, each stage of life has its task. In adulthood that task is productivity, or generativity; in old age it is integration, pulling the strands of one's life together. We find the elderly doing this continually via stories charged with importance for them—their (alas, repetitious) memories of small victories, the doings of friends and family, dangers or sufferings endured, funny things and sad things. "Not



that they live in the past," a good friend observed to me, "but the past lives in them." Integration involves effort, struggle, perhaps grieving. According to Kenel, "the process of grieving is a bringing to closure the feelings associated with a particular loss and is accomplished by allowing these feelings to work their way through our minds and hearts. It is an act of integration."

In each of Erikson's developmental stages, there is some countertendency, some negative force, but it has a providential role. In adulthood one runs the danger of self-absorption; in old age the continual risk is despair and disgust. By "despair" Erikson means a sense that one's vital forces and opportunities—indeed, one's very importance—are running out. The ebbing of an individual's life can be reinforced by the ebbing of a group—for example, the erosion of a family or the shrinking of a religious congregation. This is something to be wrestled with, a mighty task that we often face in a weakened condition.

What is it that arouses our disgust toward old age, according to Erikson? "The repetitiveness of human pretenses—including, of course, one's own." The derisive exclamation of Shakespeare's Puck ("What fools these mortals be!") dawns increasingly upon one.

The "virtue" (Erikson does not shun the word) appropriate to the latter stage, to be sought amid all the pluses and minuses of one's life, is of course wisdom. Erikson defines it in the "Dr. Borg" essay: "Wisdom, in whatever systematic or implicit, eloquent or quiet way it may be expressed, is the detached and yet active concern with life itself in the face of death itself. It maintains and conveys the integrity of experience in spite of the Disdain over human failings and the Dread of ultimate non-being." In that essay, Erikson

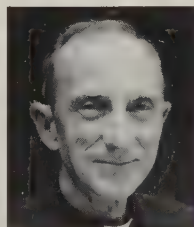
quotes a poem that the doctor and his daughter-in-law have been recalling, bit by bit:

Where is the friend I seek everywhere?  
Dawn is the time of loneliness and care.  
When twilight comes, I am still yearning.

I see His trace of glory and power,  
In an ear of grain and the fragrance of a flower.  
In every sign and breath of air  
His love is there.

The volume *Adulthood* contains William J. Bouwsma's essay on "Christian Adulthood," which explicates, "in the figure of the Christian as wayfarer or pilgrim" and in the task of achieving "the full stature of Christ," this Eriksonian process of "indefinite growth." But Erikson himself deserves the last word. Here is his observation, following on the poem above, which can serve us as a precious testament:

Every human being's Integrity may be said to be religious (whether explicitly or not), namely, in an inner search for, and a wish to communicate with, that mysterious, that Ultimate Other: for there can be no "I" without an "Other," no "We" without a shared "Other." That, in fact, is the first revelation of the life cycle, when the maternal person's eyes shinningly recognize us even as we begin to recognize her. And it is the hope of old age, according to St. Paul's promise.



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# Embodied Love in Celibate Ministry

*John P. Mossi, S.J., D.Min.*

**C**elibacy is an intense, personal, special type of life with God that comes from the depth of one's womanhood or manhood. According to *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning* (National Council of Catholic Bishops, 1990), "The theory of celibacy poses no huge problem. The celibate chooses not to give his (her) life to any one person, so as to be able to share it generously with many people. That's the ideal."

However, ordination, a vow, or a promise does not neutralize the role of sexuality in a person's life. Priests and religious Sisters and Brothers retain their entire incarnate being, including gender identity and sexual feeling. "In practice," according to *Human Sexuality*,

living out the commitment to forgo the experience of conjugal love can be very difficult. Because celibate persons are called to love and serve all the people whose lives they touch, young and old, men and women, their vocation, like that of all Christians, is one of being fully human and fully alive. They are called to relate to others authentically and deeply in friendship. It is the question of giving appropriate expression to such friendship that is, at times, troublesome. Finding the median between chaste embodied expressions of care and affection and those reserved for couples mov-

ing toward marital commitment calls for careful and candid discernment.

This quote confronts the tensions that celibates encounter in ministry. How does the celibate balance the embodiment call to be "fully human and fully alive" with the "appropriate expression" of friendship, love, and trusted service for the sake of the Kingdom? Current reports of sexual abuse and exploitation by those in ministry make exploration of the thorny questions surrounding celibacy and effective ministry all the more important and indicate that a new paradigm may be needed.

In this article, we consider the Buddhist story of the two monks, which depicts contrasting approaches to embodiment. We then look at the two great commandments in terms of the framework of love and service they mandate. Next we journey with Father Laforgue, subject of the movie *Black Robe*, to a plague-stricken Huron village, where his immersion in an unfamiliar culture forces him to reevaluate his conceptions of theology and embodiment. We also examine the dialogue of Jesus and Peter in John 21:15-19 as an illustration of the key criterion for ministry leadership. Finally, we examine the story of Jesus' encounter with the sinful woman in Luke 7:36-50, which reveals a paradigm for uncompromising celibate ministry.



## STORY OF TWO MONKS

In *Song of the Bird*, Anthony de Mello, S.J., renders the Buddhist story of two celibate monks as follows:

Two monks who were on their way to the monastery came to the river bank, where they met an exceedingly beautiful woman. She wished to cross the river, but the water was too high and swift. Upon her request, the older monk lifted the woman on his back and carried her across. Upon arriving on the other side, they exchanged pleasantries and each party resumed the journey.

Now the younger monk was thoroughly scandalized. For two full hours he berated his companion on the flagrant violation of the holy rule: Had he forgotten that he was a monk? How dare he touch a woman, and, more, actually carry her across the river? And what would people say?

The older monk listened patiently to the interminable harangue. Finally, he interrupted, "My friend, I left the woman on the river's shore. Are you still carrying her?"

The celibate monks represent two attitudes toward sexuality. The younger approaches the human body, the feminine, the sense of touch as sordid temptations and threats to rule and vocation. The effect of such a skewed mindset is alienation and separation, not only from those in need but also from his brother monk, whom he excoriates. This somber religious lacks humor, compassion, and the spirit of pastoral care.

The older monk can converse with the woman and appreciate her femininity. He is comfortable with tactile encounter and can freely use his bodily strength and surefootedness in order to assist her. He also seems aware of appropriate boundaries: he knows what to say and do, and what would be unfitting. Perhaps if their roles were reversed, the older monk could just as easily ask the woman to assist him in crossing the river.

## BRIDGING OF HUMAN AND DIVINE

Like these two monks, celibates in ministry are always revealing the extent of our belief in the incarnation. Embodiment, a corollary of the incarnation, helps us appreciate sexuality in two ways: first, by valuing the totality of the humanity of Jesus; second, by cherishing the spirit of God, which is implanted wholesomely in the complexity of our humanity, including our flesh and sexuality.

There can be little doubt that the fullness of embodiment helps us treasure the bridging of the divine and human in the Word made flesh, as well as in our own bodily dignity. Whether celibate, married, or single, whether heterosexual, bisexual, or homosex-

ual, individuals in ministry disclose their incarnational worldview—whether limited or holistic—through lived embodiment.

And where does one look to survey the extent of one's embodiment effectiveness? As in the case of the two monks, we can examine the quality, depth, and intimacy of our relationships. Here is a practical criterion: the manner in which a minister relates in friendships, to those served, and with colleagues, as well as in ordinary daily exchanges—or the manner in which a minister stands aloof from others or becomes only partially connected—is indicative of the healthiness or dysfunctionality of his or her link to God, neighbors, strangers, and self.

## EMBODIED LOVING REQUIRED

In Luke's gospel, a lawyer approaches Jesus and tests him on the specific conditions one must meet in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds by asking the lawyer a double question: "What is written in the Law? What is your reading of it?" Luke 10:25–28 asks us to ponder the same query. The lawyer answers his own question by quoting Leviticus: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Jesus commends him: "You have answered right; do this and life is yours" (Luke 10:28).

The quality of loving that Jesus praises and expects of his disciples focuses on integrality. Furthermore, Jesus does not change the "must" imperative that introduces this fourfold loving: the human task is to engage the resources of heart, soul, strength, and mind so that these interact and complement one another. Given the anthropological understanding of the Jewish world, the energies of the wholesome disciple are thus directed in trinitarian form: to God, others, and self. If we dare to live and to minister so holistically, the commendation of Jesus is clear: "Do this and life is yours."

## EMBODIMENT PRESENTS CHALLENGES

How does embodiment surface in daily life? Its manifestation is manifold. It is found in our eyes, in the intensity and depth of our gaze. It is revealed in the way we personally (including physically) engage one another. It surfaces at table, in whether we just race through our meals or take the time to dine, savor, and converse. Embodiment is expressed in how relaxed we are with the diverse communities of which we are part. The way we dress, the way we smile, the way we touch are all embodiment expressions. In all of these, God is present in every cell,



synapse, affection, and communication of our being. Of course, we know this—but seldom beyond an abstract level.

As we become more of an embodied people of God, pertinent sexuality issues and concerns will continue to affect ministry. Especially for those who embrace a celibate way of building the Kingdom, embodiment will present challenging questions: Is our love holistically Lukan, or does it dwell within a barricaded refuge? In ministry, do we reveal the presence of God through authentic friendship and intimacy, or do we play the glacial professional? If God's love can count "every hair on your head" (Luke 12:7), how do we care for our bodies and maturely respond to our physical needs?

## CELIBACY AND SEXUALITY

Embodiment challenges celibate ministers to be more incarnational, not less; to embrace with a purer vibrancy all that it means to be human and sexual. We are called to recognize God housed in our temples of clay and speaking through our earthiness. Our body finally becomes a starting point and a listening post for God's activity. As Norman Pittenger proposes in James Nelson's book *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, "Our sexuality is the ground or base for our capacity to enter into relationships which are life-enhancing, life-enriching, and provide the possibility for humans to become what God would have them become: namely, fulfilled, integrated, sharing, and free recipients of the divine love." This mystery of God in our sexuality assists us in embracing others both physically and spiritually in the ministerial task of creating a church.

If celibacy is to continue being viable, celibates have to grapple with the meaning and significance of flesh and spirit. This consideration is overdue. Our sexuality has for too long been treated cursorily or, worse, as second-class. It is difficult to reconcile for ourselves such dualisms as heaven-earth, natural-supernatural, spirit-body, and sacred-secular; to free ourselves from inhibitions related to friendship and intimacy; to surmount sexist fears; and to come face-to-face with the basic truth that we are sexual beings, called to transcendence from birth to death.

As Mary E. Kenel observed in her article "A Celibate's Sexuality and Intimacy" (HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, Spring 1986), the gift of embodiment strengthens our appreciation of "body and sexuality as healthy and positive elements rather than impediments that must be overcome on the way to God." In this realistic light, body and sexuality are recognized as things that contribute to our effectiveness in serving

our fellow human beings and conveying the gospel message of life and love.

Whenever we avoid the Incarnation and its invitation to embodiment, we pay a high price. Part of our historical compensation has been to stress redemptive theology, with its emphasis on catechesis and sacraments. We instruct, teach, celebrate, and preach in various paschal formulas: "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again." Rightly so, for this is the great mystery of faith. Yet, as the Nicene Creed reminds us, the kerygma is balanced with the Incarnation: "He was born of the Virgin Mary, and became [flesh] man." Jesus, who was like us in all things except sin, I am sure cherished an individualized sexuality that lent itself to exploration and fulfillment in concert with his mission.

Saint Irenaeus reminds us that the glory of God is the person fully alive. The icon of this glory is Jesus. In body and spirit, Jesus serves as a paradigm of how to love, relate, touch, and heal, and how to use our body, affectivity, and sexuality in appropriate ways to communicate the presence of God in the human and ordinary events of the day.

The integrated humanity of Jesus is a model for celibate ministry, which is under scrutiny today by culture and church. We are being investigated as to how authentically and trustworthily we love and serve as disciples.

## FILM PRESENTS CONFLICT

In the movie *Black Robe*, a learned and sensitive French Jesuit, Father Paul Laforgue, makes a winter journey by canoe from Quebec to a Huron mission village 1,500 miles away. He is escorted into the wilderness by Algonquin guides. With each paddle stroke, Laforgue's embodiment values and narrowly defined religious viewpoints clash with the characteristics of the unfamiliar culture he has entered.

In the beginning, Laforgue assumes that the Indians have no authentic religion. Yet they are in touch with the voices of nature and the promptings of their dreams. Conversely, the Indians see the "black robes" as blind to the spirits of this world, and they can make no sense of the concept of a spiritual heaven divorced from the natural world.

As the story unfolds, we witness the struggle between two theological paradigms. Celibate Laforgue remains aloof. He reads and writes in his journal. He vainly tries to evangelize; after all, the Indians need salvation. He reveals his body only to whip it in penance for having observed intercourse. In contrast, the communal Algonquins hunt, paddle, cook, eat, sleep, and mate together. They decorate their bodies with paint, feathers, and ornaments. They are at



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## Embodiment challenges celibate ministers to be more incarnational, not less; to embrace with a purer vibrancy all that it means to be human and sexual

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home in the woods. Laforgue becomes lost in the forest, in this foreign, earthy environment.

Perhaps analysis of this accentuated cultural discord addresses some of the difficulty people have in understanding celibacy today. For the Algonquins, celibacy simply didn't make sense. They could not understand why a man would abstain from sex for the sake of a kingdom and out of a total love for God, unless he were a devil. Nor did the warriors care to hear about a "spiritual" heaven without women, hunting, and tobacco.

After being captured and tortured by the Iroquois, Laforgue—full of doubt and despair, in touch with the fragility of his person—arrives alone at the Huron village, which is stricken with deadly fever. Here, for the first time, Laforgue sees Indians as people, not just souls to be saved. He appears more vulnerable; his eyes convey compassion. His defenses are down. He is powerless and poor. He faces great need in terms of both his own crisis and that of others. He is forced to create a new ministerial paradigm—one centered on an indigeous people, not his French culture; one that is pastorally of the heart, not exclusively of the head; one in which he waits to be asked instead of initiating and assuming control.

Toward the end of the movie, the Huron chief asks Laforgue a haunting question. It is the question for all who are engaged in ministry. It is an embodiment question. The chief, surrounded by the sick and dying, a few tattered warriors, and the shaman, asks: "Do you love us?"

Do you love us? Can you love us? How will you love us? Are not these the pastoral questions that any

individual, congregation, family, or group ultimately asks of embodied ministry? The response becomes a moment of transparent truth, as well as a starting point for ministerial effectiveness. The chief is asking about the depth of our commitment: Will you enter into communion with us as we are now, today, in our shabbiness, in our disbelief, in our desperation?

### LOVE ESSENTIAL TO MINISTRY

In John 21:15, Jesus asks Peter a similar question: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" This is the only question that Jesus asks three times. Thus, it becomes an important inquiry, as well as a criterion for entrance into ministry. Jesus links loving and ministry. Our ability to be lovers comes first. Once we have given our credal assent to be lovers—"Yes, Lord, you know I love you" (John 21:15)—ministry follows: "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17).

The purpose of paying such attention to the role of embodiment in celibate ministry has one intent only: to make us better lovers. Preface III in the liturgy for marriage best expresses this love mandate: "Love is our origin, love is our constant calling, love is our fulfillment in heaven." In marriage, and equally in celibate ministry, embodied love is "the mirror of God's everlasting love." It is not only our destiny, our finality; it is our present major task.

I would like to suggest a paradigm that might help us incorporate more fully into ministry the gift of embodied love. Such a paradigm needs to respect the feminine and the masculine, to balance the minister's ability to receive and to serve, to express a loving celibacy that is appropriately incarnational and kenotic, and to integrate the somatic and affective components of personhood, which are significant and important.

Luke 7:36–50 relates the story of the sinful woman who anoints the feet of Jesus. She speaks physically through her body, her actions, and the totality of her sexuality. Jesus receives the tearful washing, the kissing, the wiping with hair, and the aromatic anointing of his feet. In these, he is able to recognize her "great love."

Throughout this entire nonverbal experience, Jesus is focused on the woman and her actions. He is very present. Jesus is not swayed by what others think about this woman or how they interpret what she is doing. The fullness of the sexuality of Jesus is comfortable with the woman's expression of her sexuality. In fact, Jesus specifically praises her various gestures of love in order to challenge the narrow judgments and attitudes of Simon the Pharisee. By naming and commending each of the gestures of this anonymous woman, Jesus takes Simon to task for his conspicuous inhospitality:



You see this woman? I came into your house, and you poured no water over my feet, but she has poured out her tears over my feet and wiped them away with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but she has been covering my feet with kisses ever since I came in. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. For this reason I tell you that her sins, many as they are, have been forgiven her, because she has shown such great love.

Both this woman and Jesus model for us the Incarnation, an embodied communication and communion through their respective sexuality. They demonstrate intimacy in an appropriate relationship. With adult openness and candor, each is able to hear the other's story. There is acceptance and an invitation to growth in God: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:50). In contrast, Simon the Pharisee is stuck in his own rigidity and constrained categories. He is unable to "see" this woman, to understand her, to love her, or even to be taught by her. Likewise, he is unable to see or hear Jesus. In many ways, Simon is like the younger monk in the Buddhist tale. A nonincarnational vision is very limiting, and in Luke it is shown to be destructive as well.

At the Last Supper, Jesus tied a serving towel around his waist and washed the feet of his followers. As a paradigm, that act reflects some of the truth of what it means to be a ministerial leader. The paradigm of the anointing in Luke also conveys wisdom about embodiment and ministry. Each serves as a challenging and illuminating model, especially for celibate ministers, of how to embrace and express one's humanity, affectivity, and sexuality in giving and receiving God's incarnational love.

## REFLECTION EXERCISES

1. Which section or story in this article requires the most ministerial stretching for you? What incarnational doorway is embodiment challenging you to examine?

2. How would you explain the meaning of celibacy to a young adult? To an unchurched person? What does the concept of embodiment contribute to one's understanding of celibacy?
3. Describe the ways in which you integrate appropriate use of sexuality in ministry. Ask colleagues or members of your team for their perceptions and feedback. Discuss any differences.
4. The incorporation of embodiment in ministry has its risks and boundaries. In your specific ministry, what critical guidelines and values must be respected? Can you cite instances in which trust was misinterpreted or infringed upon, and the resulting consequences?
5. How would you describe the lived appreciation of embodiment in your daily life and ministry? Can you identify any tension areas? What changes would you like to make? Be specific.

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# Developmental Stages in Mature Years

*Mary Elizabeth Kenel, Ph.D.*

**A**s we age our way into mature adulthood, our task is to seek to bring into balance the tension between a sense of integrity and enduring comprehensiveness and an opposing sense of despair, dread, and hopelessness. Throughout our lives we have, on some level, anticipated the finality of old age, experiencing an existential dread of nonbeing alongside an ever-present process of integrating behaviors, choices, strengths, and weaknesses that constitute what has been called our sense of “I,” or self, in this world. In entering into the final stage of life, this tension reaches its peak. Our challenge is to draw on a life cycle that is far more nearly completed than yet to be lived, to consolidate a sense of wisdom with which to live out the future, to place ourselves in perspective among those generations now living, and to accept our place in an ongoing historical progression.

## **INVESTMENT IN LIFE**

A theme that pervades Erik Erikson's later work (described in the book *On Vital Involvement in Old Age*), which he conducted with his wife, Joan, when they were both in their eighties, is the need to maintain a vital investment in life while living out the life stages of generativity vs. stagnation and integrity vs.

despair. The virtue of the generative stage is that of care. It is the capacity for creating and caring, for nurturing and maintaining, that is an integral part of the only happiness that is lasting.

Most often, this sort of caring is lavished on children. Even persons who are not parents, however, have been involved in careers or relationships that have had strong elements of nurturing in them. Others have been engaged in a variety of creative endeavors, and each of us has most certainly been called in some way to make a contribution to the ongoing maintenance of the world. Some have done this through actual work performed in institutions of learning or healing. Others have contributed financially to the support of such institutions or to various groups, environmental or charitable, that seek to maintain the physical well-being of the planet and its inhabitants. Still others have made a major contribution to society by strengthening the power of the cultural world, making it present and accessible to others through their support of music, literature, and the arts.

## **GRAND-GENERATIVITY**

As we enter the later stages of life, however, our forms of generativity must change. The Eriksons



speak of a grand-generativity that goes beyond midlife's direct responsibility for maintaining the world. This demands role changes—for example, becoming an aging parent of adult children, a grandparent, an old friend, a consultant, an adviser, or a mentor. While different from the roles played in earlier life, these roles do allow us to experience grand-generativity in relationships with people of various ages.

The grand-generativity that is appropriate to the later stage of life incorporates care for the present and concern for the future, for the persons immediately behind us, for the children not yet born, and for the survival of the world as a whole. This sort of caring contributes to our sense of immortality and allows us to face with integrity the final phase of life.

## RECAPITULATION AND INTEGRATION

It is important to remember that as we work our way through Erikson's final stage, we must recapitulate earlier stages. We still have identity needs: we wish to be perceived and respected for our uniqueness, to find creative outlets for ourselves, and to grow in meaning. We continue to have participation needs: to set and complete personal goals, to find rewards valued by our culture and by ourselves. We still have partnership and intimacy needs: the desire to blend the self with another person, to balance dependence with independence, to balance autonomy with intimacy. We still experience a need to be needed: in order to save ourselves from purposelessness, we exercise our grand-generativity and caring, and strive to be helpful, useful, and necessary. It is through our active participation in this final stage of development that the life cycle weaves back on itself, ultimately integrating maturing forms of hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, and care into a comprehensive sense of wisdom.

## LIFE REVIEW USEFUL

In order to achieve this recapitulation and integration, many people find it helpful to perform a life review. This exercise may be performed alone, but the benefits that accrue from it are multiplied if it can be shared with a significant other, a spouse, a friend, or a therapist. Many people perform an informal life review, telling and retelling the stories of their past and savoring anew the flavor of important events and relationships. Those who work with the elderly note that for many, entry into a creative writing class affords them the opportunity to write an autobiography. Although many people embark on this task "for the sake of the children," they find

themselves enriched as they review their personal histories.

Whether the life review is conducted informally or as an adjunct to therapy, it encourages the elderly person to consciously reexamine the patterns of his or her life. With the "work" of one's lifetime drawing near to completion, the patterns of relationships, the meaning of events, and the significance of various turning points stand out more clearly and colorfully than was possible when one was actually living through them. By revisiting the past, we are able to reframe old conflicts and arrive at resolutions that we can live with now. In regard to areas of the past that are not very positive, the life review can allow us to grieve or can stimulate us to atone in some way for past faults.

## SIX FACETS OF LIFE REVIEW

If you wish to undertake a life review, the following points are among those you may wish to address.

**Look for milestone events in your life.** Think of the events that you recall most often—both the crises you encountered and the happiest times in your life. Recall them in detail, experiencing the feelings, positive and negative, that are linked with those events.

**Think of the persons who have played significant roles in your life.** Determine why these persons were important to you, and reflect on the manner in which they enhanced or hindered your growth as a person. Think of the persons in whose lives you have played a significant role and to whom you are still a significant person. In what ways have you helped them to become well-developed persons in their own right?

**Think of the talents and gifts you possessed and developed over the years.** Ask yourself in what ways you made use of these gifts in the past. Are there new ways in which you can exercise these gifts now?

**Look back on your family of origin.** What values and resources did you obtain from your home? How did you incorporate these values into your adult life? In what ways are these values still operative in your life now? If you have rejected the values presented by your family of origin, consider the reasons that prompted you to do so. What values did you personally choose to replace those you rejected?

**Consider the lessons you have learned from your life experiences.** What elements of wisdom have you acquired?

## **Reflect on your life of faith and your belief in God.**

In what ways have your beliefs and religious practices changed? Who is God for you now?

As you complete your life review, ask yourself if you feel satisfied with your life as it has been. If you find yourself burdened by regret or guilt, recognize your need to do additional grief work. Consider the possibility of making some positive response to alleviate the guilt or regret. Perhaps this is an invitation to let go of a long-standing grievance, to reconcile with family or friends from whom you have been estranged, or to eliminate anger and bitterness from your life. Perhaps it is a call to put more effort into your present relationships. Or it may be an opportunity to accept what was rather than focus on what was desired, to differentiate the real from the idealized view of our lives. Rectify old mistakes if possible; forgive yourself and others if it is impossible to make present-day changes. Above all, come to an appreciation of your own uniqueness. Make full use of the time remaining.

## **SOLITUDE AND REFLECTION**

The later years are definitely a time in life when we must foster inner growth by permitting ourselves to have periods of solitude and reflection in order to touch the stream of wisdom that lies within. Reflective, prayerful periods allow us the necessary space to do the processing and reorganizing of personal information that promotes the integration of various elements of the self and facilitates the changes in attitude that are needed late in life. We can meet our needs for privacy, reflection, and solitude in many different ways, from spending time alone in a formal retreat to simply taking a solitary walk each day.

It is most helpful, however, to find places of solitude that are also places of natural beauty. It seems to be easier to accept our place in the cycle of life as we witness the cycle of the seasons, aware of the shifts of color and shade; as we pass from the glories of spring through the fruitfulness of summer and on to the richness of autumn. In the natural context, the mystery of winter no longer seems an injustice or a mistake, something to be avoided or fought against. Instead, we are able to discover a rightness in that period of silent waiting, aware that life and growth continue deep within the darkness of the earth. The signs of another spring bring a sense of renewal and resurrection, and an upsurge of the hope that Erikson spoke of, as we recognize that we have come full circle.

Periods of solitude, in conjunction with a life review, offer us opportunities to work on areas of

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**In the final stages of life, we need to find new determinations for self-identity and self-esteem that are not linked so closely to work roles, to the health of the body, and to a narcissistic preoccupation with the self**

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growth that Robert Peck described as far back as the 1950s. He suggested that the tasks appropriate for the later years include a shift in emphasis from work role and body preoccupation to ego differentiation and body transcendence, as well as a final shift from ego preoccupation to ego transcendence. Another author, Helen Luke, referred to this process as a “stripping away” of the more egocentric forms of power and the heroic images we have of ourselves.

## **A TIME FOR LETTING GO**

Growth in the final stages of life calls for a letting go of the very things we worked so hard to acquire in our younger years: jobs, families, status, money, power. In their time, these things were appropriate and served us well. At the last stages of life, however, there is a need to simplify our lives and to make the final inward journey. We need to find new determinations for self-identity and self-esteem that are not linked so closely to work roles, to the health of the body, and to a narcissistic preoccupation with the self. It is no easy task to do this, for to give up power at any time of our lives is painful. Yet it is necessary that at some point we surrender our work identities and role preoccupations—not without regret, but with a sense that the time for these matters has passed and that a new valuing of the essential self, free of the trappings of office or position, is to be brought into being.



In like manner, body preoccupations—our youthful valuing of health, fitness, strength, vitality, and potency—must give way to the ability to transcend the body, to live through and beyond physical frailty and pain. In the later years we need to come to value beauty of character over the physical beauty of youth, to value the gifts of mind and spirit over physical strength. We need to recognize the truth of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's statement: "It is only with the heart that one sees rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eyes."

### TASK REQUIRES COURAGE

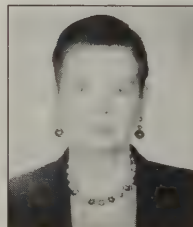
In the end, even our preoccupation with our own egos must be transcended. The very final stages of growth demand that we move from a focus on our individual selves to a metaphysical, more spiritual view. This means taking on the "dark night" of the self, confronting the prospect of personal death and the dissolution of the self as we know it within this framework of time and space. Erikson was correct in naming the last of his life stages "integrity vs. despair," for such a task requires tremendous courage. The thought of the final dissolution of the self is neither comfortable nor comforting. In negotiating this final task, however, we can achieve wisdom, buoyed by hope, recognizing that throughout our lives we have touched others. Through friendships, through our work, through our contributions to society at large that have supported the maintenance of the world, we have achieved a more extensive future than one self could cognitively encompass. It is to recognize that, in the words of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "our echoes roll from soul to soul, and grow, forever and forever."

### AGE BRINGS GROWTH

In conclusion, it is good to recall that although the later years of life are marked by loss, sorrow, and grief, they are years of unparalleled growth. As we work our way through the last of the developmental stages, we have a unique opportunity to revisit and revise each of the stages that have gone before. Although the confrontation of our physical mortality brings with it feelings of dread, despair, and hopelessness, our working through that confrontation leads to greater individual integrity, strengthened by the acquisition of wisdom and the full flowering of hope. In committing ourselves to the quest for full human development in these later stages of the life cycle, we prepare ourselves to receive the winter grace that prepares us for a second spring.

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# Reflections on Retirement

*Nathan R. Kollar, S.T.D.*

**R**etirement is a fact of life in modern America. Because it is a recent fact of life in our social history, we sometimes forget that it is an important stage of life, demanding new skills and relationships. The newness of this stage is often not recognized by those who are retiring and by those around them.

Retirement is leaving behind a life of work for pay. There certainly is work in retirement, but one is not paid for it. Working for pay is a significant factor in people's lives. Young teenagers stand taller when they bring home their first paycheck. Middle-aged workers are noticeably depressed when they do not receive merit pay or when they are paid what they perceive to be inadequate compensation for their abilities. Work, especially work for pay, is an essential part of modern life and significantly affects an individual's identity. Voluntarily or involuntarily ceasing to work for pay is a significant event in one's life.

Retirement in our society, however, is more than not working for pay; it is usually also an announcement of old age. Because being old and not working for pay generally have negative connotations in our society, many people equate retirement with negative changes in lifestyle. For some people, retirement may be a negative experience, but for others it is a positive change. Because retirement is relatively new to our cultural experience, we may overlook

the many positive contributions retirees make to our society.

## MEASURING ONE'S AGE

An "old" sage once asked, "How old would you be if you didn't know how old you were?" Most of us measure age by birthdays. We are forced into making birthdays equal age by a bureaucratic society that needs means of classifying people: one must be 18 to vote and fight in a war, 21 to drink, 65 to retire. Yet the worst way to classify people and other living things as "old" is according to their birthday. How we function is a better indication of our degree of aging.

Many people associate retirement with being "old," meaning debilitated and weak. Yet most people who retire are functionally in the later maturity stage of life, not the elderly stage. The functional stage of later maturity is between middle age and old age. It is best described as a period in which one retains significant personal relationships, is physically and mentally healthy, and is capable of continuing one's middle-age lifestyle if one wishes to, even though one is no longer working for pay.

In contrast, the functional stage of old age is a time of dependency—physically, emotionally, and/or



socially. Old age, functionally, is the condition in which we expect death soon.

How old would you be if you didn't know how old you were? Your answer to that question indicates how old you are. The majority of people who retire do so at a time when they are in good shape physically. Some may need surgery or may have begun to take some type of medication, but overall they are financially, physically, socially, and emotionally independent.

Are you young enough to retire? *That* is the question. A positive response indicates that you are quite vigorous, have sufficient income to make ends meet, and have a great deal of time on your hands. In other words, you are freer than you have ever been.

## PROPHECIES ABOUT RETIREMENT

Retirement is a self-fulfilling prophecy. We spend our whole lives developing into who we will be when we retire. Our images of retired people, our thoughts about retired people, and our interactions with retired people also shape who we will be when we retire.

Until they actually experience it, few people fully realize that the freedom associated with retirement may present a great challenge. But our challenge during retirement is really just another version of the challenge we face throughout life: to take responsibility for our own actions. My recent experience with an all-male focus group underlines both the centrality and the difficulty of rising to that challenge.

The men in the focus group claimed that they were tired of sleeping late, tired of traveling, tired of playing games, and tired of being asked to volunteer for every organization trying to save money. These tired men were retired executives, middle managers, and businessmen. Their complaints were quite different from those I had heard at a city senior center a few weeks before. The men in the focus group had money and leisure, but they no longer had prestige. The elevator that once went up had come down. Earlier in their lives, when the elevator of corporate advancement went up, they were on it, making gains at every stop: bigger paychecks, better clothes, fabulous vacations, awards, and the envious recognition of those on the floors below. Their value increased each time the elevator rose—until, for whatever reason, they retired. Suddenly, they found themselves on the bottom floor again. Although they had garnered so many valuables, they themselves were now undervalued—and now they were tired.

Usually, retired professionals feel tired because they are bored. And they are bored because they have no sense of direction. Their elevator is stuck. What

they must face is the challenge of destroying their boredom and unsticking the elevator.

There is no "smart bomb" that destroys boredom, no five easy steps guaranteed to drive it away, no boss or other agent to take it away. One must destroy boredom oneself, because boredom is a call to act, and to take responsibility for one's actions, and to grow. It is an internal demand to choose, prize, and act on that which we deem important.

## REGAINING SENSE OF DIRECTION

Choose, prize, and act: that is the formula for making values and shaping one's own destiny. The men in the focus group looked back at lives in which others—bosses, committees, administrations, lawyers—chose what they were to do. After joining their firms, they seldom made serious decisions on their own. Some of them worked for firms that even determined their manner of dress and place of exercise. They knew that conformity was their ticket to ride the express elevator up. After so many years of conformity to their firms' choices, they discovered that the express elevator down let them off at a life without direction.

Regaining a sense of direction in life and becoming valuable again are not easy. The habits of a lifetime, boredom included, are not easily broken. One does not make a new life; one grows into living a new life by gradually changing one's habits. That may take years—but it is not boring.

It is scary to try to change habits. For those of us who are over 55 and have long had our important goals set by others, it is not only scary but also risky. Like anyone else who begins something new, retirees run the risk of making mistakes, of failing. What retirees tend to forget is that they are at a new stage in life, even though they are seen by many people as old. Being retired is just as new as becoming a teenager, getting married, and riding the corporate elevator. Just as young teenagers sometimes revert to childhood behavior to avoid growing up, many newly retired professionals run back to paid work to avoid facing this new stage of life. For retirees who do not run to work as an escape, the challenge to create a new style of life can be invigorating.

Never before have so many people with so much money and leisure been found among retired professionals. No wonder many of them feel bored; there are few models of what it means to be old, retired, and sufficiently wealthy to freely determine the next twenty-five years of one's life. Many of today's retirees find their freedom of choice overwhelming.

As we retire, the challenge is to get on our own elevator, forget how we envisioned retirement when

we were still dependent upon others for our identity, and realize the creative possibilities that retirement presents.

## PHASES OF RETIREMENT

Many people do not have an opportunity to choose retirement; instead they are “retired” or asked to take an early retirement. Often surprised and shocked, these individuals are suddenly forced to decide between accepting retirement or trying to find new work. In his book *Social Forces and Aging*, Robert Atchley helps us to understand the process of retirement and to determine whether or not we are truly retired by identifying phases of retirement.

According to Atchley, the *preretirement phase* is characterized by fantasies about what retirement will be like. Especially as one gets closer to retirement, it is not unusual to look forward to retirement with great anticipation, or even to mentally live in retirement before actually doing so. During this stage one’s full-time job becomes less and less interesting. When retirement finally begins, one enters the *honeymoon phase* of the process. Remember all those fantasies, all that anticipation? During the honeymoon phase, the retiree does everything he or she looked forward to doing—again and again. But sooner or later—whether in three months, six months, or a year—boredom sets in. The retiree enters the *disenchantment phase*, when it seems that none of the fantasies have come true and life has lost its challenge. This is the point at which one is faced with accepting the challenge of choice and learning to live with it. Those who cannot accept the retirement lifestyle find another job. Those who do accept the challenge enter into the *stability phase* of retirement, which lasts until the beginning of old age.

## THEORIES IN CONFLICT

How fast can you be? This is a strange-sounding question because it puts together two concepts that are each thought by opposing theorists to be central to the stability phase of retirement: the goal of being and the goal of doing. Arguments supporting both viewpoints abound in the psychological literature on retirement.

According to the disengagement theory of aging, individuals respond to growing old by gradually and inevitably withdrawing from the various roles they occupied in middle age, becoming increasingly self-absorbed and less involved with others. As the years pass, according to this theory, we become more interested in being, not doing. Retirement is for taking it easy and relaxing; we selectively withdraw from ac-

tivities and involvements. Society doesn’t need us anymore, and we don’t need society. We have done our work—that’s it.

Disengagement is a process of mutual detachment between society and the individual. The day-to-day workings of society cannot depend on those who, with every passing year, increase their probability of dying. The stability of social life would dissolve if our leaders and functionaries died off on a regular basis. Thus, according to disengagement theory, society must detach from those who are arriving at the final stage of the life cycle. This is a mutually satisfying disengagement prompted by the awareness that elderly people will not live much longer. Withdrawal from the tasks of middle age creates a new equilibrium between the elderly and society, according to this theory, and those who disengage well have a sense of psychological well-being. Essentially, then, disengagement is a process preparing society and the individual for the loss of the individual.

Proper disengagement results in more instant enjoyment and fewer serious commitments; it takes seriously the idea that naked we came into this world and naked we should exit. In terms of retirement, disengagement theory suggests that we should become less concerned with the things of this world and more concerned with the things of the next. This notion fosters a spirituality of immateriality and otherworldliness. Obviously, disengagement theory answers the question “How old are you?” by saying “Very old” and by disallowing the option of choosing an aggressive and involved retirement.

In contrast, activity theory (or substitution theory) holds that one may grow during retirement if one actively engages in life rather than disengaging from it. According to that theory, as we relinquish the physical, mental, and social roles or activities of middle age, we replace them with new ones. For example, a retired schoolteacher might find a new way to keep teaching. This seems the dominant theory behind many of the government-funded programs for the elderly. It implies that social activity is the essence of life for everyone and that we must sustain adequate levels of social activity in order to age successfully. Some would suggest, therefore, that retirees should create their own subculture so they can have socially meaningful roles, activities, understandings, and leisure. Retirement, from this perspective, holds the promise of a new life, different in form from one’s life before retirement. But that life must be active: doing is being.

Because of the lack of substantive longitudinal research supporting either the disengagement theory or the activity theory, other attempts have been made to define how the emotionally mature older person



handles retirement. But no matter which theory one subscribes to, the fact remains that the challenge of retirement represents God's unique call to us as we age, and our response must mix doing and being. We are faced not with a choice between disengagement or activity but with a challenge to combine the two. We need both contemplation and action in retirement: doing depends on being, but being depends on what we do.

## SIGNS OF SPIRITUALITY

Our response to any call may find us short of breath, full of breath, or without any breath at all. The same may be true in our spiritual life. As we grow older we may find ourselves short of spirituality, hard-pressed to sustain our spirituality, or completely lacking spirituality. Retirement is a significant change in life, and our spirituality must reflect that change. We usually notice our spirituality when it is not enlivening us—when we are retired but not inspired.

Signs of stunted spirituality are many. We may find ourselves uncomfortable with other people—not just with old friends, who sometimes abandon us when we make new choices, but virtually with everyone. We just don't feel that we belong. We may find ourselves continually overwhelmed by the ambiguity, uncertainty, and chaos of the world that surrounds us. We may no longer be sure of where we stand or who we are. We may find that we are more self-centered, sarcastic, and rigid than ever before, with little or no interest in our world and the people who inhabit it. Television, radio, magazines, newspapers, books, movies, and prolonged conversations may all seem empty. It may seem that no one engages our curiosity or has anything interesting to say. These are familiar signs of being short of breath spiritually.

We have a choice when we begin to notice these signs in ourselves. We can attempt to escape back to a style of life with which we were more comfortable and hope our spirit will return; we can attempt to face head-on the causes of our lack of spirit; or we can sit around and be bored. Flight, fight, or boredom: these are the three possible responses to the crises of spiritual life during retirement.

All of us have been short of spirit at some time in life. What is different at retirement is that we have

few role models or clear principles to help us make choices for a fuller spiritual life.

The psychologist Erik Erikson suggests that two virtues should characterize our life during retirement: care and wisdom. Care is an ever-widening concern for what has been generated by love, necessity, or accident. Wisdom is the detached yet active concern with life itself in the face of our own and life's limitations. Certainly, these two virtues should be the two sources of our retirement spirituality: care for other people, things, ideas, values—everything that is alive and enlivening our world—and wisdom to find ways to enliven what and whom we care for.

## A TIME FOR GRATITUDE

Retirement is a gift that some people never get. Although they might yearn to retire, they must continue to work in order to eat, to have a home, and to fulfill their duties to those they love. Increasingly, for instance, people over 60 have to care for their parents, who may be 85 or older. Retirement is something for which to be thankful.

We each have our own way of expressing thanks. Certainly, a life of retirement should be characterized not only by care and wisdom but also by thankfulness to God, country, and all those who have enabled us to retire. We need living models of these virtues, which are essential to any spirituality of retirement.

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# A Retreat for the Sexually Abused

*Julie A. Hollitt, F.D.N.S.C.*

**S**ix women from various orders of religious life—myself included—recently made some Australian history. As survivors of childhood sexual abuse, we gathered for a six-day healing retreat on the coast of New South Wales.

One purpose of this article is to inform other religious—whether survivors or their supporters—that such prayer experiences are not only possible but also helpful for women and men who suffered sexual abuse as children. We want to spread the word that if sexual abuse is part of the background of a person in religious life, he or she is not alone and does not have to remain enslaved by a crippling sense of isolation. Nor do such individuals have to remain frightened off by more familiar retreat or prayer experiences, which can be extremely painful due to the ignorance (either on the part of the survivor or on the part of others) of the processes of spirituality for survivors of sexual abuse.

The other purpose of this article is to take another step toward heightening for those in religious life an awareness of the issues faced by the often silent but numerous women and men religious who struggle with overwhelming personal issues of childhood abuse. Such issues include coming to terms with a God (to whom they have since committed their lives) who seemed silent and absent in their times of trouble.

Are the needs of sexual-abuse survivors different from the needs of other individuals making a retreat? What are some of the processes or understandings that characterize the experience and valid spirituality of a survivor? The best way to begin to grasp the answers to these questions may be to look at some of the questions survivors have. They are the questions of persons who not only belong in religious life but who are also needed there.

## **ABUSE AFFECTS IMAGE OF GOD**

How do we relate to a God who, when we were children, seemed not to care, or seemed unable to save us? How do we relate to a God who is all-powerful, masculine, omnipotent, almighty, in control of the universe as well as the past, present, and future, who is just and merciful, who sees all, who is a judge, and who is able to bend wills? How do we relate to an image of God that is dangerously similar, in so many ways, to our images of the perpetrators who sexually abused us as children? (My own abuser some time ago went to his grave.) How do we pray the Roman Liturgy, which uses terminology that reflects an image of God that is, from a survivor's point of reference, oppressive, threatening, and sometimes physically distressing?



Given this oppressive image of God, where is there a place in prayer for darkness, anger, despair, and exhaustion? Such feelings are often triggered in a survivor regularly exposed to a face of God that is reminiscent of an overwhelming, inescapable threat. Is prayer a noun (an event) or a verb (being)? Is God officially encountered only in the chapel, or in the church, or in postures or formulas or times? Or does the survivor also encounter God when curled up in a corner of the floor that feels safe, perhaps desperately alone and shedding silent tears? Who is this God with whom we have thrown in our lot? Is it the God of victory and distance and right places and times and postures? Or is it the human being who, in an anguish of distress, fell on his face at night in the Garden, or who allowed himself to be touched by the unclean, thereby being unclean with them (Mark 5:21–43)?

### DYSFUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO COMMUNITY

The questions of survivors also concern community, because all of the above questions, and the distress that accompanies them, affect how we live with ourselves and others. If community life is structured so that an individual's *physical* presence at meals, at community prayer, and in front of the television is the measure of his or her value and involvement in "living in community," then how does a survivor who is a member of a religious community find a home in Christian community? In the household of the survivor's family of origin, the disguise for the hidden and isolating distress caused by sexual abuse was often the victim's physical presence at the family table and around the residence—a presence that did not disclose his or her dreadful secret. What happens if community, for the survivor in religious life, reproduces similar expectations of a "feet under the table" style of presence? Once a survivor has embarked on the journey of remembering and healing, maintaining that style of presence becomes impossible.

While many questions in answer to a few may not be very satisfying, they certainly express some of the disturbance and insecurity experienced by a survivor upon finding himself or herself in the womb of God and there discovering that God wants to give birth. Such a position can be one of tremendous anxiety.

### RETREAT EXPERIENCE CONSTRUCTIVE

Apart from devoting a significant portion of the New South Wales retreat to the foregoing questions

and reflections, the participants also engaged in other helpful processes. These were a session of art therapy, the opportunity to have massage therapy, the discussion of a specific passage of scripture (Mark 5:21–43, which contains comfort and encouragement for women survivors in the church), and a Eucharist shared at the beginning and end of the retreat. Each morning we gathered for prayer; each session was prepared by one of the participants, using language and symbolism that reflected her personal spiritual journey and experience. These times were rich in variety and in truth. Each day we were also presented with, and contributed, reflections on our experience and potential as women in religious life; as women of prayer; as women relating to God, living God, and expressing other realities of God; and as women in the church. We contemplated our appreciation for those who had risked supporting us and walking with us over time.

Before coming together for the retreat, we had met one evening over a take-out meal to talk about our needs and expectations in regard to the retreat, as well as to get to know one another a little bit. This was important because of the substantial amount of anxiety survivors feel about coming out into the open about the abuse in their past, as well as its effects on their lives at present.

### BREAKING SILENCE

As a group of women, we still feel the need (as do many others, whether in religious life or not) to maintain some silence for our own sake. However, knowing what it is to be trapped by silence for the sake of others, we want to reach out and communicate to survivors and others the hope and possibility of meaningful experiences of retreat, community, spirituality, and relating with God. Such experiences are valid and meaningful because they acknowledge the realities, difficulties, and experiences of people who were victims of sexual abuse as children.



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# Spiritual Healing for Bereaved Parents

*Reverend William L. Wolkovich*

**P**ietà, a support group for grieving parents, began in the spring of 1982, when three bereaved mothers asked if my parish in Norwood, Massachusetts, would provide space for regular meetings. My long-standing priestly ties with hospitals, nursing homes, a nurses' guild, a cancer support group, and a group providing music for the sick made me especially amenable to the idea. Earlier, the trio of women had attended a chapter of a well-known nationwide bereavement group in a more distant community. That organization's official neutrality toward religion, however, had led them to found a new support group in which they could integrate faith with their understanding of grief. Thus the birth of Pietà, named after Michelangelo's celebrated sculpture of the Virgin Mary mourning over the body of Christ.

For caution's sake, the core group and I invited a priest with a degree in social work to attend the first few sessions and give us his feedback. In later months we invited other professionals to give short talks. Soon our originators sensed that many speakers had a clinical style of presentation and failed to forge the needed rapport with group members. Unless the speaker was also a bereaved parent, his or her message tended to lack weight. From then on, the principal core member functioned as the facilitator, with an occasional substitute, including myself.

## **MOURNERS OF ALL FAITHS OR NONE**

Although Pietà is a Catholic-oriented group, it is open to people of all faiths or none. While we express the hope that each participant will gain some benefit from our religious perspective, we never ask a person to identify his or her faith. Meetings begin and end with prayer. Occasionally, I offer comments; mostly, I pray silently throughout the evening. Usually, I ask for an outpouring of healing by simply repeating silently and slowly, "Come, Holy Spirit, come." Once in a while, on a special occasion, I add some vocal or violin music at the end of the session.

The group gathers throughout the year, regardless of season or weather. The number of participants varies between ten and thirty, with an average of twenty-five. A few times when over thirty people attended, we broke up into smaller groups for the first hour and reconvened for the second.

The facilitator starts each session by welcoming newcomers and making a few announcements. Periodically, she reminds participants about such things as confidentiality, the origin of the group's name, and the nonjudgmental nature of the sessions. She passes around a register for all to sign; newcomers are asked to add the name(s) and death date(s) of their loved one(s). Then, going around the circle, each person



introduces himself or herself, mentions the name(s) of the deceased, and makes a comment to acquaint us with the loved one(s).

The facilitator begins discussion of a prepared starter topic, and then lets the evening take its own course. All the aspects of grief come up repeatedly, but in a varied light as expressed by different parents. The deceased offspring include both children and adults. Predictably, the causes of death include auto accidents, disease, suicide, and homicide. Despite any of their dissimilarities, the bereaved are bonded together and furnished with insights into their own situations through their common experience of grief. We sometimes cry together; we often manage to laugh together, too.

After a decade in existence, our group has become known to secular social agencies as well as to our archdiocesan family life office. Referrals come from these sources. Our archdiocesan directory lists our Greater Norwood Pietà and two spinoff affiliates in other locations. Word of mouth is still one of the most effective means of acquainting a large audience with our monthly sessions. Pietà also gains notice via an annual memorial service held early in Advent, which has drawn from 400 to 700 people. Attendees include siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and friends of deceased loved ones. Monitoring obituaries on a regular basis, I have sent over a hundred tactfully worded letters of condolence that mention our support system.

## **PARTICIPANTS IN PIETÀ**

Who comes to Pietà? Women outnumber men by about four or five to one. The fathers who do come are generally there with their wives; seldom do men come alone. Occasionally, a sibling or a close friend accompanies the bereaved father or mother to ease the way.

All along, we have been mindful that some bereaved individuals may need professional help. On occasion a participant may display extremes of anger or bitterness, or testify to a behavior pattern that surely seems unhealthy. In such cases, we privately and gently suggest professional intervention. Some who are already in therapy participate in Pietà meetings at the suggestion of their counselors. Most attendees, however, come on their own initiative.

Some participants come very frequently, some periodically, some occasionally; a small number attend meetings only once or twice. Some parents come to the group within a month or two after the burial of their child, whereas others carry an unresolved grief for months and years before they finally find the courage to participate. Eventually, group members

learn to cope with their grief and integrate it into their lives. Yet in a generous gesture, many continue to come in order to be of help to others. Almost all Pietà "alumni" wish to remain on our newsletter mailing list.

Pietà maintains a mini-library of some fifty books and pamphlets. Admittedly, much of the useful literature that has come to our attention is thin, if not wholly lacking, in a religious dimension. Besides needing to bind up past hurts, the bereaved need fresh reminders of the Resurrection and eternal life. Even those who do not necessarily share a Christian vision ought to have a chance to hear about these convictions; perhaps they might somehow find it possible honestly to integrate something of the Good News into their personal grief journey, according to their own religious creed.

I found it refreshing that the secular organization MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) twice invited me to speak. The first time, they asked me to speak about "Faith Issues" at a two-day seminar for professionals in medicine and law enforcement. The second time, they invited me to preach at an ecumenical memorial candlelight service. The recent trend toward a holistic approach to healing can surely be applied to the art and skill of comforting and healing bereaved parents.

## **MYSTERY OF GOD'S WAYS**

After ten years' experience, my own pastoral outlook has been adjusted and enriched. One realization I have gained by listening to and learning from the participants in Pietà is that few crosses are more painful to shoulder than that of burying a son or daughter—or, worse still, two, three, or more children. Accordingly, it is best to avoid explaining the death of a child as "God's will." A parent plunged into consuming pain is not especially likely to accept the philosophical distinction between "direct" and "permissive" divine will. True, I have witnessed extraordinarily heroic faith in parents resigned to an acceptance of God's will. Yet for the majority, the route to this mature conclusion is a long and often bumpy one. At times some of the parents are angry with God, find it difficult or impossible to pray, and stop going to church. They need assurance that they have not lost their faith because they instinctively question divine providence. To quiet these suffering people, I simply stress the mystery of God's ways, beyond our grasp here on earth. Knowing that the bereaved are at various stages in their grief and their emotional and spiritual capacity to accept eternal truths, I suggest that they reflect on the fact that there must be meaning (however hidden for now) in

the death of their children, just as there was meaning in their children's lives. My hope is to plant some notions that the parents will ponder in the private sanctuary of their hearts, perhaps at a future time if not immediately.

### **SIMPLE EXAMPLES REVEAL TRUTHS**

I stress the distinction between asserting that the loved one's death makes no sense and admitting or accepting that one is unable to fathom the death. Since Christ used simple examples to clothe profound truths, one should not hesitate to do the same. Here are my three favorite comparisons.

(1) Drawing on the first speech of my childhood, I say a few Lithuanian phrases (presuming no one understands), and then ask, "Did you understand what I said? No? But can you say it made no sense?" The reply is usually, "Of course not." Yet once a person studies a foreign language and thereby gains insight into the purpose of hitherto strange sounds, how different and enlightening the experience of hearing those sounds becomes.

(2) I ask the listener to imagine a babysitter holding a small child in a kitchen where there is a shiny and very hot stove. The youngster bolts away from the adult, dashing with hands outstretched to touch the glistening object. The guardian chases after the little one to hold back the wailing, foot-stamping, wrestling prey, red-faced with frustration and anger. A distant observer for whom the stove is out of sight might see only a child tormented by a cruel adult. This example emphasizes the possibility of a benevolent person tolerating the suffering of a child for the sake of a higher good (in this case, the youngster's safety).

(3) I use the example of a jigsaw puzzle as a dual illustration. I ask the listener to imagine opening a fresh carton of 1,000 puzzle pieces, selecting any one of them at random, and inspecting it carefully. One cannot, of course, make any sense of such a fragment. When the rest of the puzzle has been pieced together, though, one is instantly illumined upon pressing the absent segment into place. The lesson of trust can also be drawn from the puzzle example. In attempting to interlock the pieces, one implicitly and unquestioningly trusts some unknown designer in a toy factory. Sorrowing parents need to consider anew their trust in God, even in the face of grief.

### **REMEMBRANCE PROMOTES HEALING**

One of the most crucial lessons I have come to appreciate more fully is the function of remembrance in the healing process. Historians help us celebrate the past. In doing so, they proclaim enduring values and lessons. The Holy Eucharist, so central to Catholic life, provides believers with the supreme memory of God's largesse. By thinking often of their deceased loved one, the parents celebrate and reenact their love for that child. The bereaved need to pronounce the loved one's name, recount the child's accomplishments or acts of mischief, and mention the child's name at family gatherings. This variety of remembrances is a sweet if sad step in healing, because grief is the flip side of the coin of love.

One nearly universal experience of the bereaved parents relates to shattered expectations. Invariably, a number of hitherto seemingly close friends fail to come forward. They not only avoid visits but also literally remain silent, denying even a card or a phone call. Providentially, other sensitive people, perhaps barely known or even strangers, reach out to the grieving fathers and mothers, bringing needed and unexpected consolation. Every parish should have a society that performs this crucial function so that no one bears the burden of grief alone. Bereaved parents may experience disappointment or bitterness if their churches and clergy are not attuned to their severe sorrow. Even if a church has no support group for grieving parents or finds that it is not feasible to start one, something can still be done on a one-to-one basis. Granted, the gospel often shows Jesus dealing with crowds, but he also frequently spent time with only one person or a few in order to heal. Planned periodic visits, cards, and phone calls to the grieving can be highly therapeutic. These gestures are powerful signs that someone remembers, someone cares. They are graces that help bereaved parents ride the emotional roller coaster of grief and arrive at a healthful and lasting integration of grieving into their lives.



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# A Lesson in Realism

*William Schock, S.J.*

**I**n the Fall 1991 issue of HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, I offered some ideas and exercises that would be helpful in learning to grow in the practice of "Acceptance as a Way of Life." The basic idea is that if you can't change something, the most sensible thing to do is accept it. Many of our negative experiences of anger, resentment, impatience, or frustration (to mention only a few) are caused by our fighting reality instead of surrendering to it. This article on developing realistic expectations is a continuation of the article on acceptance. The two practices go hand in hand. When we accept things and people as they are, we do not expect too much. And when we do not expect too much, that is a sign that we accept things and people as they are.

It is good to have high expectations, to have great desires, and to hope for great things. Such expectations are a challenge to ourselves and to others. People can do more if they know that much is expected of them. It is also good to expect much from God. In many different ways, the Lord told us to ask for what we want—to have healthy expectations that are realistic, reasonable, and fair. Such expectations lead to satisfaction and growth.

There is a danger, however, if we have expectations that are too high, or if we expect or demand too much from ourselves, other people, or even God.

These unhealthy expectations are unrealistic, unreasonable, and unfair. Since such expectations cannot be met, they lead to frustration and discouragement. In expressions like *too much*, *too high*, or *too great*, the emphasis is on the word *too*. High expectations are helpful and necessary for growth. In this article we will try to discover whether any of our expectations are too high and, if so, how to make them more reasonable.

## HEALTHY EXPECTATIONS

Healthy expectations are realistic, reasonable, and fair. They are expressed as desires, hopes, wants, or preferences. It is normal and natural to have desires and goals, to look for improvement, and to hope for what I can reasonably expect. Personal growth comes about as the result of a realistic desire for change and growth. Growth in the spiritual life depends very much on my desire for union with God. "O God, you are my God, for you I long" (Ps. 63:2).

Normal disappointment and annoyance can arise when these healthy expectations are not met. Often I do not get what I want. Others do not live up to my expectations, even if those expectations are reasonable. I accept this as part of life, and I learn to accept situations and people (including myself) as they are.

When the expectations of Jesus were not met, he experienced disappointment, which he clearly expressed in several gospel passages: "Men of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matt. 14:32); "The other nine, where are they?" (Luke 17:17); "Will you also go away?" (John 6:67); "Could you not watch one hour?" (Mark 14:37). These passages help us understand how truly human Jesus was.

The basic attitude of someone with healthy expectations is: "This is what I want, this is what I would like, this is what I am hoping for, but I won't be too disappointed if I don't get it." This attitude, like many basic attitudes, is unconscious. But with healthy attitudes such as this one, it doesn't matter that they are operating at an unconscious level, because they are not problematic. Healthy attitudes lead to mature emotional reactions and appropriate behavior.

## UNHEALTHY EXPECTATIONS

Unhealthy expectations are unrealistic, unreasonable, and unfair. They are expressed as demands, with words like *should*, *must*, or *should not*. Questions like "Why don't they come on time?" or "Why don't they tell me things directly?" hide my unfair expectations about what others should do. Questions like "Don't they know I'm trying to sleep?" or "Don't they know I had other things to do?" hide my unfair expectations about what others should know.

Great frustration, anger, impatience, resentment, or discouragement can arise when my unfair expectations are not met. If I experience such feelings, it is usually a sign that I am expecting too much.

The basic attitude of someone with unhealthy expectations is "This is what must happen, this is how others should act, and I will be very upset if it doesn't turn out my way." This kind of attitude, which is unconscious, is problematic because it can create many problems for oneself as well as for others.

## AN IMPORTANT REFLECTION

How do I know if my expectations are healthy and reasonable desires or unhealthy and unreasonable demands? How do I know if I am expecting too much? Since my basic attitudes are unconscious, I must look at my emotional reaction and my behavior when my expectations are not met. Negative feelings (e.g., resentment, unjustified anger, too much impatience) and inappropriate behavior (e.g., shouting unnecessarily, banging and kicking things) are signs of unhealthy expectations. My feelings and behavior will always tell me if there is anything wrong with my way of thinking about things.

## EXERCISES FOR CHANGE

The following exercises can help you discover and change your unfair and unrealistic expectations. After you have changed your demands to desires, you will experience a change in the way you feel and act.

**Identify the people involved.** Who are the people of whom you have unhealthy expectations? Children, workers, patients, officials, companions, older or younger people, superiors, priests, certain other individuals, God, yourself? Do you find that you respond to these people with negative feelings or inappropriate behavior in certain situations?

**Examine your feelings.** What are your negative feelings? Anger, impatience, resentment, frustration, discouragement? Any other such feelings?

**Examine your behavior.** What is your inappropriate behavior? Shouting, banging things, retreating into silence, giving up, being moody, not cooperating? Anything else?

**Reflect on the behavior of the other people.** What are the other people doing? Is it really so terrible? (If you think so, it will become terrible for you, and you will feel terrible.)

**Analyze your expectations.** Make a list of your expectations. Are you expecting too much? Which expectations need to be changed? It is unrealistic to expect (demand) that people or situations be any different from what they are. You can help bring about a change in someone more easily by accepting that person as he or she is and by not expecting too much.

**Decide to change yourself.** Decide to accept the other as he or she is, with all the limitations you find in that person. Accept the situation that cannot be changed. Decide, also, not to expect too much. Imagine yourself meeting with the other person and expressing your acceptance. Ask him or her to forgive you for demanding too much. Keep imagining yourself doing this until it feels real. You will know if you are only pretending. Accepting others as they are and expecting less from them is a decision, not a feeling. You do it because you choose to.

**Practice dealing with the other person in fantasy.** After you have made your expectations more reasonable and have really accepted the other person as he or she is, imagine yourself with that person in a situation in which you would have been upset before.



Now imagine yourself feeling and acting differently, being a little more patient, a little less upset. Be happy about your ability to change your expectations and to be able to act and feel the way you want to.

**Apply your new response in real life.** The imaginative practice of dealing with people in new ways will have an effect on your real life. Slowly, you will discover a difference in the way you relate to people with whom you were annoyed before. But be patient with yourself; it takes time to change old habits. The important thing is to really accept other people and situations and to have reasonable expectations.

**Practice empathy.** Imagine that you are the person whose behavior you find annoying. What is that person feeling and thinking? What is that person's life situation? What frustrations and tensions does he or she experience? After imagining yourself in the place of that person, you will be able to deal with him or her more reasonably. As the familiar American Indian saying goes, "Never judge a man until you have walked for two weeks in his moccasins." You won't need two weeks. Becoming that other person for just a moment will make a difference.

**Ask if you are expecting too much from yourself.** Unhealthy guilt feelings and feelings like self-pity, depression, and discouragement are usually signs that you are expecting too much from yourself. Are you expecting the impossible by demanding that you be perfect and never make a mistake? Accept yourself as the human, imperfect person you are, and relax. Having a good laugh at your mistakes is very healthy and makes it easier for you to change what can realistically be changed. Besides, making mistakes makes you easier to live with.

**Ask if you are expecting too much from God.** Are you expecting God to always answer your prayers the way you want them to be answered? If you are, you will find yourself getting angry with the One who is not doing things your way. It takes humility to give up overcontrolling other people. It takes humility to stop trying to control the Almighty and to pray as Jesus taught us: "Your will be done" (Matt. 6:10).

**Engage in group sharing of expectations.** Conflicts can arise in any group of people who live and work together if some are expecting too much from others. Conflicts can also arise if reasonable expectations are not communicated. It can be a valuable exercise for everyone in a group to share their expectations with the others. Those who are responsible for particular activities can tell the others who are involved

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**It is easy to ascribe negative motives to others and to blame them unfairly; instead, be willing to discover reasons for excusing others**

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what is expected of them. Through discussion and compromise, expectations that are seen to be unrealistic can be changed.

## **REASONS FOR EXCUSING**

There are usually reasons for excusing what is happening, if you really want to find them. If you are annoyed in a certain situation, there may be a very good reason for what is happening, although it might not yet be apparent. If a door doesn't open as it should, for example, maybe there is a reason. Instead of pulling on it with too much force and perhaps breaking it, look to see if the latch is open or if something is blocking the door. There is a reason for everything. When someone is late for an appointment, to use another example, you can give that person the benefit of the doubt. There may be a good reason for his or her lateness. Find out before blaming the person unfairly and making a fool of yourself. What if there really is no good reason—the person is just always late? There is also a reason for that person's habitual tardiness. It is easy to ascribe negative motives to others and to blame them unfairly. Be willing to discover reasons for excusing others.

One reason for excusing others is that they are acting with some kind of limitation, weakness, or handicap that you may not be aware of yet. Some of the most common limitations are the following:

**Limited intelligence or ability.** Intelligence tests prove that there is a wide range of human mental ability. Some people just don't have the mental or physical ability to do what you unreasonably expect.

Some do not have the physical ability to work the way you want or to play a game properly. They are doing the best they can, not the best you unfairly demand. You need to learn to accept others with their limitations so that you won't expect too much.

**Limited knowledge or skill.** Some people have the intelligence or ability needed, but they haven't learned everything yet, and they don't have the necessary experience. It takes time to learn things and acquire skills. People get discouraged if too much is demanded of them too quickly. You can't reasonably expect new workers to be able to do what the "old-timers" can do.

**Limited values or ideals.** Values and ideals can be learned, but you cannot reasonably blame someone who hasn't learned them yet. Often too much is expected of others who do not have higher values or ideals. These things are learned slowly.

**Limited emotional maturity or security.** It is perhaps more difficult to adjust to another's emotional limitations than to any other possible limitation. It is very easy to expect a person to be more mature emotionally than he or she is at present. If someone acts in an immature way or shows signs of emotional insecurity, it is certain that something has happened to cause this weakness. Such people can change, but in an atmosphere of blame and criticism they are not free to do so. Being blamed only makes them feel worse, and all their energy goes into defending them-

selves. They will be free to change when they feel understood and accepted just as they are.

## FORMULA FOR PEACE

We all know what R.I.P. stands for. When that inscription is printed on your obituary card or your tombstone, it will be too late for you to experience peace on earth. Why wait until you die to find peace? The time to find more peace in life is right now, in this life. The magic formula is HALE, which stands for Higher Acceptance and Lower Expectations.

The word *hale* means healthy. You can become more healthy emotionally, which will make you more healthy physically, by learning to practice HALE. Accepting more and expecting less are like two sides of a coin; they work together. You accept others as they are by not expecting too much from them. When you expect less from others, it is easier to accept them as they are. HALE really works, but you have to work at it. If you do, you will certainly experience greater peace and satisfaction throughout life.



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# Closing the Family Home

*Patrick J. McDonald, M.S.W.*

**D**ealing with the death of a loved one under any circumstances is a difficult adjustment, but after both father and mother have died, a critical transition period occurs in the life of the adult human being. When the last parent dies, the awesome ambiguity of death and the uncompromising demands of life descend upon a person with full force. This visitation of hard reality brings with it the arduous tasks of distributing the family possessions and selling off furniture, artifacts, tools, and clothing.

Then the time comes to close the door of the family home for the last time and move on with life. This highly symbolic act of closing offers a palpable experience of the seriousness and magnitude of the adult life transition associated with the loss of both parents.

My own experience of this transition began five months before the door to the family home was closed and locked for the last time. Each step of the way of this lengthy and very emotional process, I learned something about life and death. In this article I recount some of the experiences I lived and share some of the lessons I learned. First I reflect on the symbolism of closing the family home and the implications of that act for adult development. Then I describe five specific adult developmental tasks that are called for as the process of closing the family

home unfolds. Finally, I suggest some ways to ritualize the developmental tasks involved, in order to enhance the family's healing process.

## **DEATH OF THE LAST PARENT**

Six years after my father had died, my mother became seriously ill while visiting our home one morning in early summer. The emergency-room personnel delivered the hard news that she had suffered a massive and debilitating stroke. After three days and three nights of watching, waiting, praying, and anticipating either her death or the prospect of long-term nursing home care, she died peacefully. The whole family was present during the entire experience, and we were given the opportunity to pray together, say our goodbyes, and be a part of her peaceful death early on the morning of her 76th birthday. The final phase of her dying process was swift and merciful. There was certainly no arguing with the fact of death, and the family adapted to it in a straightforward, even heroic fashion.

## **FEELINGS OF EMPTINESS**

It took time, however, to work through the deeply felt experiences of the death, the funeral, and visits



from extended family members. But life did calm down again—and when it did, a large emptiness opened up for all the members of my family. It was similar to the ache one experiences when family and friends leave after having gathered for holiday celebrations, and the house seems so quiet and empty—but this ache was much deeper and more relentless.

For the next month and a half, no one in the family wanted to move anything out of the family home; it was just too painful. So we waited, and walked through the house, and discussed the fact that there was no pressing reason to move anything immediately. During that period, we visited a great deal, told stories, and bonded as a family more deeply. Often, we stayed overnight in the house, allowing the familiar surroundings to nurture us a little while longer. We invited the pleasant atmosphere of the family home to speak to us of the long and seemingly endless days we had all enjoyed under its sheltering roof. Once more, we breathed the fresh summer air, threw Frisbees back and forth across the huge green yard, sat on the back deck and chatted, grilled a few last bratwursts, and drank some beer in memory of our parents, who had built their dream home twenty-seven years ago. After we had allowed sufficient time for these healing visits, we felt ready to face the task of closing the family home.

### **SYMBOLISM OF CLOSING THE HOME**

When there is no longer a home for a child to return to, his or her life changes dramatically and irreversibly. As the furnishings and personal effects of the deceased parents are distributed or sold off, the family home begins to take on a barren look, losing the character that was expressed in the familiar furniture, collectibles, dishes, glassware, and other items that uniquely identified it. On the last day of the house's life as the family home, the keys are handed over to its new owners. This final relinquishment of the family home brings several indisputable facts into dramatic relief:

**The child is now an orphan.** No matter what the chronological age of the surviving child, he or she is alone when the last parent dies. A marriage and family of one's own, supportive brothers and sisters, empathic and loyal friends soften the transition, but one's childhood is now gone. There will be no returns home for Christmas, special holidays, and other significant events—the tradition-creating experiences that bind family members together.

Letting go of the gathering place creates repercussions throughout the family. Members sometimes react in an unpredictable and angry fashion, propelling

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other family members into reactive behavior. The family is launched on a search for a new center.

**The child is reminded of his or her mortality.** The closing of the family home brings the child face-to-face with mortality—sometimes abruptly. For example, my siblings and I believed that our mother had many fruitful years ahead, but her illness descended like an unexpected summer storm, and she was dead within three days.

Death effectively ends the stubborn fantasy that a parent is going to live indefinitely. Thus, the parent no longer serves as the main actor in fantasies that protect the child from facing his or her own mortality. One friend expressed the reality this way: "There is no longer anyone ahead of you at the ticket window."

**The process of leaving home is now complete.** The task of leaving home extends over a lifetime. It begins on the first day of preschool and slowly picks up momentum as the individual becomes increasingly autonomous—beginning high school, departing for college, moving into a career, marrying, beginning a family. But even those who make the most mature transitions to a more independent life generally maintain some kind of connection with home. As needed, the parents serve as a backup system, offering assistance from time to time, providing love and support, cushioning the hardness of life's unexpected difficulties, and remaining a source of great comfort.

When the door closes for the last time on the family home, that segment of one's history is finished; one is now inarguably on his or her own. This reality can be terribly stark. It calls upon the child to



bury once and for all the myth that someone will always be there to offer a "safety net" if life does not go smoothly. This realization (or its denial) is sometimes a catalyst for good (or ill) adjustments in life.

**In a sense, the child is now in solidarity with the homeless.** The ease and flexibility with which the child once visited his or her home town, moved in and out of the lives of old friends, and found comfortable lodging in the parental home are now gone. Although the experience of closing the family home is certainly not comparable in gravity to the experience of losing one's own home or becoming a refugee, it is nevertheless a transition that serves as a baptism into the solidarity of the displaced.

**Family relationships change.** The home symbolizes the presence of the parents in the life of the family. The home is the central gathering place, the main office, the nerve center, the resting place, the source of family bonding rituals, and the anchor for the children in the family. This anchor forms the basis of the relationships between the siblings. Once the family home is closed, the children are handed the hard task of redefining their relationships with one another. The parents no longer perform the roles of mediating and interpreting the children's behavior toward each other. The siblings must now encounter each other more directly and be accountable for their personal strengths and weaknesses, some of which may have remained hidden while the parents were alive.

Some embrace this challenge willingly; others avoid it at all costs. Sometimes the family moves into a period of intense conflicts and distressful exchanges. The maturing process usually demands a difficult and painful reevaluation of sibling positions and relationships.

## **SOME DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES**

The developmental challenges related to the closing of the family home are numerous and difficult, and they are contingent on the realities just described. For the purposes of this article, I will discuss five challenges that illustrate some of the problems associated with moving into a deeper level of adult maturity.

**The rethinking of basic values.** Coming face-to-face with the reality of death stimulates in the surviving child a deep and serious rethinking of the significance of every dimension of life. Death confronts one with the arbitrariness of all constructed realities. The houseful of material goods invites the survivor to examine closely the values that governed the

lives of the parents, and even to consider whether those values have any genuine relevance for the family members left behind. Watching the family home change from a welcoming and familiar dwelling to just a house being readied for market is an abrupt and harsh reminder of the passing of all things. By its very nature, the act of sorting through pictures, memorabilia, and other personal possessions forces one to ponder hard questions about what really lasts in this life and what objects or endeavors are worth the investment of personal energy.

Like the hundreds of objects the family sorts through, identifies, categorizes, holds on to, or discards, the fundamental values that undergird every choice a person makes are reconsidered and often restructured.

**The resolution of dependency needs and the movement toward greater autonomy.** When the parental supports are removed, the surviving child is challenged to become more autonomous. This task is usually not welcomed wholeheartedly by the child, who to a degree still feels the pull of childhood fantasies that someone will always take care of him or her. It is as if locking the door of the family home symbolizes the child's emergence into the light of day to begin a fresh life on his or her own terms. Like it or not, the bonds of childhood dependency have been broken, the mandate to grow up and be an adult has been delivered, and there is no turning back. The child is now fully responsible for running his or her own life, and is accountable only to self and to significant others in his or her social context. Some individuals accept these hard challenges more easily than others.

**A fresh sense of responsibility in life.** The door of the family home closes behind the child, and the flow of days continues. As the mourning process unfolds, the individual's sense of the continuity of life begins to return, and so does his or her vitality. Although there is no set time or way to go about mourning, one is inevitably presented with the challenge to turn one's energy away from mourning and to invest it in a more dynamic and satisfying approach to life. At the center of that challenge is the invitation to find the resources to move on and reconstruct life on new terms, and to feel good about it.

**A sensitivity to the lived experiences of others.** Death and the major life transitions associated with it offer the surviving child an experiential context against which to measure the sufferings of others. Implicit in the survivor's experience is an invitation to be more compassionate toward others in pain. I have heard many survivors of a family member's



death say that having wrestled with the reality of death themselves has heightened their sense of compassion toward others who suffer loss.

**A deepened experience of the self.** The self is that dimension of the person which embodies the core of values, feelings, and attitudes that shape one's approach to the tasks of day-to-day living. The closing of the family home challenges the individual to deepen the process of defining the self in a new and more autonomous fashion. Developmentally, the task is to find the self-definition needed to move into a more open, compassionate, and creative phase of life. Eventually, a new and integrated experience of the self engenders a feeling of wholeness.

### RITUALIZING THE CLOSING

All cultures ritualize the passage from life to death. Ritualizing the event serves the purposes of legitimizing human mourning, healing the feeling of deep emptiness associated with death, and passing on the legacy of life to the next generation. In addition to the rituals associated with one's cultural milieu or religious context, every family can engage in some simple yet beautifully meaningful rituals surrounding the passing of the last parent and the closing of the family home. My own family shared in the following rituals, which may be as healing for others as they were for us.

**Slowing down the process of living and letting time heal.** This simple ritual was behind our family's decision to leave every object in its place for a while and let the surroundings of the family home speak to us. We occupied the house on weekends, talked, ate meals at the family table, lived the life of the neighborhood, and just enjoyed each other's company before making any decisions about how to begin the next chapter of the transition. That immersion in the familiar surroundings of home allowed us all to experience some of the inner healing we so badly needed. After that time of healing, the family collectively knew it was time to begin the process of closing the family home, and we discussed the subject openly.

**Telling our stories.** The initial work associated with closing down the house took an entire three-day weekend. We four children (without spouses, children, or friends) inhabited the house, walked through the rooms, looked at the furniture and other artifacts, and made some preliminary judgments about how to proceed. Throughout the weekend, we told stories remembered from childhood,

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**Coming face-to-face  
with the reality of death  
stimulates in the  
surviving child a deep  
and serious rethinking  
of the significance of  
every dimension of life**

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laughed at humorous memories stirred by certain objects, shared our feelings, and cried together. Then we developed a plan for the next two months, which we subsequently carried out at a pace that our feelings told us was appropriate.

The initial weekend project yielded deep feelings of satisfaction, even though few objects were actually moved. The rituals of storytelling, sharing meals, and absorbing the realities of the situation together were deeply healing.

**Maintaining the legacy of hospitality.** The dining-room table was the center of life at our family home for many years. My parents were gracious and hospitable, and their dining-room table was truly eucharistic—a table of thanksgiving.

During the five-month period in which our family worked on the closing of the home, the table became the center for dining, storytelling, sorting memorabilia, and weighing the transitional tasks ahead of us. When our work was finished and the door to the house had been closed, I personally delivered the family table, which I had inherited, to my local house of prayer. The table is on loan there indefinitely and serves as a locus for warm hospitality. My parents' spirit lives on in that table.

**Reliving the past through personal treasures.** As family treasures were mined from file cabinets, closets, storage spaces, and hideaways in every corner of the house, we uncovered a great richness. We each discovered certain artifacts while alone in the house and found others when the entire family was present: old report cards, graduation certificates, pictures, letters from World War II, love notes on Mother's Day, news clippings, and a host of per-



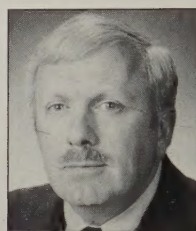
sonal items having value only to family members. No one immediately claimed any of them. They were simply brought out into the open, shared, discussed, and embraced as treasures that symbolize our family history. We developed a phrase for the process: "five minutes of clearing and twenty minutes of tears." We decided that all these objects would be placed in three large boxes, stored away until the house was occupied by its new owners, and then sorted during a quieter and more leisurely time. The process was too emotional and too beautiful to hurry. We look forward to continued rituals of storytelling and healing as we carry out the process of sorting and distributing those treasures.

**Celebrations of moving on.** We celebrated our last day in the house with a shared prayer and the breaking of bread together. This offered us one last sacred meal of thanksgiving for all of God's gifts throughout our family's twenty-seven years in the house.

We began by reflecting on a passage from a work by Thomas Merton, in which he reminds us to be-

come aware of how we are called to work hand-in-hand with God to create our identities. As we discussed that passage, we celebrated the great goodness of God. We also read and discussed Saint Luke's account of the Emmaus story, in which some of the disciples came to recognize the risen Jesus in the breaking of the bread, and we reflected on how God spoke to them at that meal.

Then we broke bread together and celebrated God's hospitality toward all of us in that house. Like the disciples who recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, we rejoiced in our continued discovery of God's love in our family history. In retrospect, we saw that every experience we had shared in that home had been graced.



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## Where Can We Throw Our Frisbees Now?

The playing field  
is dead.  
Sentenced  
by winter's death knell.  
The spectator's deck,  
closed.  
The green trees,  
barren,  
sold to November winds  
and coming snows.  
Cold.

Where can we throw our Frisbees now?  
And where did the endless green summer days go?  
Did our stubborn childhood die as unsurely  
as a half-tossed Frisbee,  
wobbling its way across cool space,  
then edging and diving  
short of outstretched hands?

Where can we throw our Frisbees now?  
Are they locked away and forgotten,  
a dusty reminder of carefree childhood's flights?

Are there no more sunlit fields  
inviting us to soar again,  
smooth and straight,  
as sure and confident as a snap-wristed launch?  
Where laughing on a summer day  
is as easy  
as popping a Coors Light.  
And the breezes of warm afternoons  
blow undisturbed through your hair.

Where can we throw our Frisbees,  
now that childhood's house  
is buried under the winter snows?  
And we drift like untimely orphans,  
driven before the pressing winds,  
waiting for a new greening.

And we find a lasting playing field  
to plant our feet once and for all  
to put our shoulders into  
long, arcing throws,  
savoring the taste  
and breathing the smells  
of a late and lasting summer.

—Patrick J. McDonald